

No 47.

FAME

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• AND •

FORTUNE WEEKLY.

STORIES OF BOYS WHO MAKE MONEY.

DOING HIS LEVEL BEST;
OR, WORKING HIS WAY UP. *By A SELF-MADE MAN.*



Just when the wobbling house seemed on the point of turning completely over into the rushing waters help suddenly appeared at the open window. The crippled woman, perched on the brave boy's shoulder, and the little girl, uttered a glad cry.

Fame and Fortune Weekly

STORIES OF BOYS WHO MAKE MONEY

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Doing His Level Best

OR,

Working His Way Up

By A SELF-MADE MAN

CHAPTER I.

THE MAN FROM THE WEST.

"Hello, sonny!"

It was a blustering, overcast day in the first week in April, and Will Melville, a strong-looking boy of fifteen, his frank, open countenance flushed from recent exercise, was securing a dilapidated sailboat to a small wooden platform extending a few feet out into a narrow creek that branched off of Maple River, when he was hailed as above.

The boy looked up and saw a stalwart, bearded man, with a deeply bronzed countenance, standing upon the top of the bank behind him.

That he was a stranger in that locality Will guessed instinctively, for the lad knew about everybody for miles around in the valley.

"Well, sir," replied Will, judging the man was in quest of some information.

"You live around here, I s'pose?" said the stranger, interrogatively.

"I do," answered Will.

"Know a man by the name of Amos Skinner?"

"That's the man I live with."

"You don't say," and the stranger looked sharply at the boy. "Any relation of his?"

"No, sir."

"What's your name?"

"Will Melville."

The stranger whistled softly and seemed to look upon the boy with a new interest.

"Haven't any father or mother, I s'pose?"

"No, sir."

"Mr. Skinner supports you, doesn't he?"

"I work for Mr. Skinner. He boards me and gives me \$7 a month wages."

"Is Mr. Skinner a farmer?"

"He is."

"Well off, I s'pose?"

"People say he is."

The stranger gave a grunt of satisfaction.

"Where does he live?"

"In that white house yonder."

"Got a wife, hasn't he?"

"Yes, sir," replied Will, wondering how many more questions the inquisitive stranger was going to ask.

"Any children?"

"One son, Simon Skinner."

The stranger looked at Will reflectively.

"I once knew a man by the name of George Melville, out in Cripple Creek. He said he came from these parts."

"That was my father, sir," said Will, eagerly.

The stranger did not appear to be very much surprised at the boy's admission.

"George Melville told me that he had a wife and son in Maywood, at the head of Arlington Valley."

"That's right," said Will. "Father was a carpenter in Maywood before he went out West. That was many years ago, and I was only a little boy at the time he left to make his fortune, as he said, in the Cripple Creek diggings, where gold had just been discovered in great quantities. Mr. Skinner, who was a friend of father's—in those days he was not so well off as he is now, but worked a small farm on shares—went with him. After a few months father wrote that he and Mr. Skinner had got hold of a claim which had turned out to be very rich. He expected to make enough money in a few months to be able to return home very well off. Snough, he said, to build a fine house in the village and live the rest of his life without the necessity of returning to his trade."

"Well," said the stranger, "didn't he?"

"No, sir. That was the last word mother ever received from him."

"How was that?" asked the stranger, with a curious look in his eyes.

"Because——" The boy choked up a little, and tears glistened in his eyes. "Because he died out in the diggings."

"Oh, he did!" exclaimed the stranger, in a peculiar tone. "You are sure that he died?"

"Yes, sir. A few weeks after mother received father's last letter Mr. Skinner returned to Maywood. He called at our home and told mother that he was the bearer of sad tidings. He said that he and father were partners in a claim which proved to be a rich one. That they had sold out the claim to a syndicate that was buying up all the property around in that section. Father and he had each received \$20,000 in gold coin. They had arranged to return together to Maywood. Two days before they were to start he said father suddenly disappeared. Mr. Skinner said that he and three other men had searched the district to try and find out what became of him. For a week they failed to discover the slightest clue. Then they found the body of a man at the foot of a certain precipice. The body was much battered and the face wholly unrecognizable. But Mr. Skinner said he was certain that it was his friend George Melville, for he identified the clothes and a jack-knife found in one of the pockets. He felt quite sure that father had been enticed to that spot by some of the desperadoes of the district who had heard of his good fortune, and murdered for his money, which he had changed into bills and carried about his person in a money belt."

"That was the story Mr. Skinner told your mother, was it?"

"Yes, sir. As Mr. Skinner had not positively identified the dead man, though he said he had little doubt on the subject, mother refused to believe for a long time that father was actually dead. She wrote to persons in Cripple Creek who had known father, but could only get a confirmation of Mr. Skinner's story. Finally, after many months had passed without any favorable tidings, mother

at last gave up all hope. She had to take in sewing to support herself and me, as we had no money, until at last she took sick and died."

"But Mr. Skinner came home well off, didn't he?"

"I believe so."

"And didn't he do anything to help your mother?"

"No, sir."

"Kind of mean, wasn't it, when you say he had been your father's friend?"

"Well, he's a close man."

"Oh, he is?"

Will thought he detected a grin on the stranger's face.

"Yes, sir."

"And how did it happen you came to work for Mr. Skinner?"

"After mother died he offered me a job on his new farm, and I have now been with him two years."

"Does he treat you well?"

"I'd rather not say, sir, whether he does or not," replied Will, evasively.

"He gives you seven dollars a month and your keep, you say?"

"Yes, sir; but he charges me with everything I break. And he doesn't pay me anything in winter and early spring when I attend school, though I have to do all the chores and many other things before and after school time."

"At that rate you haven't saved much money," said the stranger, with a twinkle in his eye.

"No, sir. I haven't any money at all."

"Why not?"

"Mr. Skinner says a boy like me doesn't need money, so he is saving what I have earned so that I will not squander it."

"Very kind of him to do so," remarked the stranger, sarcastically.

"He says he's acting as my guardian till I come of age."

"But he isn't really your guardian, is he?"

"No, sir."

"Very likely he is keeping back your money so you won't run away."

Will was silent.

"Did you ever feel like running away?" continued the inquisitive stranger. "You needn't be afraid to tell me, for I shan't give you away."

Will wouldn't admit whether he had ever felt that way or not.

His manner, however, gave his questioner the impression that he had.

Suddenly the boy looked up and said:

"You said you knew my father out at Cripple Creek. Did you know Mr. Skinner there, too?"

"Why do you ask that question?" asked the stranger, sharply.

"Because you have been inquiring for him."

"Yes," replied the man, guardedly. "I knew him slightly."

"Are you thinking of calling on him?"

"I had some such idea," admitted the other, slowly.

"You'll find him at the house now, I guess."

"All right. I'll go up and see."

Will had not failed to notice that the stranger looked rather shabby, and he wondered if the man's object was to try and borrow some money of Mr. Skinner on the strength of old acquaintance out West.

From what he knew of Mr. Skinner he thought there wasn't much chance of the stranger getting anything out of the farmer.

Although the Skinner farm was one of the best in the valley, and the proprietor reputed to be uncommonly well-to-do, he was extremely parsimonious.

It was like drawing teeth to get him to put up even his church dues, and he never did that until the last moment.

As for contributing to the foreign missions, or any local charity, he was not to be relied on, and it was very seldom indeed that he was asked to do so, for people didn't relish the kind of rebuff they got from him.

The stranger nodded civilly to Will, turned on his heel and started for the lane the boy pointed out to him as the most direct way to reach Mr. Skinner's house.

Will watched him with not a little interest.

This man had known his father out in the great West, and, although he had not intimated how well he had known him, still the boy yearned for another chance to talk with him and find out what his opinion was as to that father's fate.

"I s'pose I'll never see him again," he thought, disappointedly.

He was wrong, however.

He was destined to see the stranger very soon again, and under particularly thrilling circumstances.

CHAPTER II.

A GHOST OF THE PAST APPEARS TO MR. AMOS SKINNER.

"So that's George Melville's son," muttered the stranger to himself, as he walked up the lane which led to the pretentious looking farmhouse in which Skinner and his family dwelt. "Funny that I should meet that boy the first thing. He's a fine-looking chap, too—just the kind of boy that will make his mark in the world in good time. I wonder what kind of youth Skinner's son is like? Maybe I shall see him. From what I know of his father I haven't any very great opinion of him. On the contrary, Will Melville is just like his father in a great many ways, and will be more like him when he grows up. Skinner proved himself a scoundrel out West, and he has been rubbing it in, I see, ever since he returned to the East. Well, I guess I'll be able to take some of the conceit out of him—and some of his well-guarded money, too," with a sardonic grin. "No doubt he thinks himself perfectly

safe. The dark page in his past has doubtless long ceased to trouble him. It will be a shock to him when he learns that Jacob Luckstone is still alive and has him under his thumb. Squirm and wriggle as he may, he won't be able to escape until he comes down handsomely. If it wasn't that I am precious hard up, and charity begins at home, it would be in my heart to tell that boy the truth and help him to recover his rights. But as it is I need the money, and I need it badly, so I am obliged to compound a felony. I hate to do it, for I've taken a liking to that lad, but needs must when the father of lies holds the reins."

With a harsh laugh and a shrug of his shoulders Jacob Luckstone kept on up the lane and finally came to a gate which admitted to the farmyard.

Here he came face to face with a boy of sixteen years who was amusing himself tantalizing a small bull terrier.

Luckstone did not need any one to tell him who this boy was, for he read the Skinner family characteristics in every line of his homely, sallow and disagreeable countenance.

"Who are you, and what do you want here?" demanded Simon Skinner, aggressively, pausing in his delightful employment and regarding the stranger with undisguised disgust.

"You are Simon Skinner, I suppose," said Luckstone, with a chuckle.

"I don't know that that is any of your business," retorted the boy in a disagreeable tone. "I don't know you, and from your general appearance I don't want to know you either."

"All right, sonny; don't get hot under the collar. I'm not going to introduce myself to you."

"I should hope not. Well, we don't feed tramps at this place, so you'd better move on to the next farm."

"Look here, Master Simon, is your father in the house?"

"My father! What do you want with him?"

"Business, sonny, business. I've come a long way to see him—maybe that's the reason I look so shabby. You mustn't judge a book by its cover."

"My father is very particular about who he does business with. I don't believe he'll see you."

"That's where we differ, Master Simon. He'll see me all right when he learns I'm here."

"Does my father know you?" asked Simon, doubtfully.

"Well, rather," grinned Jacob Luckstone.

"What's your name?"

"Never mind my name, sonny. Just run into the house and tell your father that a man who used to know him in Cripple Creek is waiting outside to see him."

"It's a long time since my father was out West—must be seven or eight years. I guess he won't want to see you."

"All right. I'll take the chances of that. Just you carry my message."

Simon didn't like to be ordered around in this fashion, and was about to refuse, but there was something in the stranger's manner which intimidated him, and so, very much against his inclination, he entered the house, hunted

up his father, whom he found in the sitting-room reading that day's issue of the weekly Maywood News, and told him there was a man outside in the yard who wanted to talk to him.

"Who is he?" asked Mr. Skinner, looking up. "One of the neighbors?"

"No. He's a stranger."

"A stranger! What can he want with me? Did you ask him what he wanted to see me about?"

"Yes. He said he wanted to see you on business."

"What kind of business?"

"He didn't say."

"What does he look like?"

"Like a tramp—that is, he's awfully seedy, and his shoes are covered with dust as if he had walked some distance. He says he's come a long way to see you."

"A long way!" exclaimed Mr. Skinner, in some surprise.

"He told me he knew you out in Cripple Creek."

"Knew me in Cripple Creek!" cried Simon's parent, uneasily. "What did he say his name was?"

"I asked him, but he wouldn't tell me. If I was you I'd send him packing. I guess he wants to ask you for a loan. He looks as if he needed it."

"I haven't any money to loan," said Mr. Skinner, hastily.

"I didn't s'pose you had. Shall I tell him to skiddo?" grinned Simon, feeling that it would give him a great deal of satisfaction to deliver such a message to the hard-looking and cheeky stranger in the yard.

"He said he knew me in Cripple Creek, eh? You are positive he said that?"

"Yes. He seemed very confident that you'd see him."

"He did?" replied Mr. Skinner, nervously.

"Yes, he did. I think he has a lot of nerve. Why don't you send him about his business?"

"I think maybe I'd better see what he wants," said Mr. Skinner, in a tone so different from what he usually used under similar circumstances that his son regarded him with considerable surprise. "Show him into my library, Simon."

"Why don't you see him in the yard? He ain't fit to come into the house," objected the boy.

"I'd rather have him come into the library," replied his father, getting up from the rocking chair with the intention of crossing the hall to that room.

The name library was rather a misnomer for the apartment in question, as there were no books or bookshelves there, neither Mr. Skinner nor any member of the family having a bent for reading.

But the gentleman farmer, as he was derisively alluded to by many of his neighbors, called the room his library because it sounded well, and gave an air of importance to his house.

The only other person in the valley who had a library in his house was Thomas Hanford, president of the Arlington Valley Paper Mill, but his library was a real one,

for he was a gentleman of more than ordinary intelligence and education, and was accorded a good deal of respect and deference by the inhabitants of Maywood and vicinity.

"I wonder what's come over father all at once?" muttered Simon, as he retraced his steps to the yard. "He is usually pretty sharp and sweet in his dealings with trampish individuals like this man from Cripple Creek. He is not only willing to see this person, but he actually tells me to bring him into the library—just as if he was Mr. Hanford or somebody worth the attention. Looks mighty funny to me. I'd give something to know what the fellow wants to say to my father. He acts as if he could make the governor do something for him. I've a great mind to tell mother. No, I won't. One of the library windows is open. I'll show this man into the house and then I'll go outside, stand in the bushes under the window and listen to what goes on inside of the room."

Simon grinned at what he considered his own cuteness, walked into the yard and told the waiting stranger that his father would see him in his library.

"In his library, eh?" chuckled Jacob Luckstone.

"Follow me," said Simon, in a pompous way, strutting into the house.

The stranger followed him with alacrity.

Simon threw open the door of the library.

"Here's the man, father," he said, standing aside to allow the visitor to pass.

Mr. Skinner, who was seated at his desk close to the open window, turned in his chair to take a critical survey of his caller.

The stranger, without waiting to be invited, coolly seated himself in a leather-covered armchair, crossed his long legs nonchalantly, removed his weather-stained hat from his head to the floor beside the chair, squirted a stream of tobacco juice into a convenient cuspidor, and, looking the farmer sharply in the face, said:

"You don't seem to recognize me, Amos Skinner."

"I must confess you have the advantage of me, sir," replied Mr. Skinner, with a touch of his customary aggressiveness, his courage having risen when his visitor seemed to be a complete stranger to him.

"Then I'll introduce myself to you," grinned the man. "My name is Jacob Luckstone."

"Jacob Luckstone!" gasped Mr. Skinner, his face turning a sickly white. "Impossible! Jacob Luckstone is——"

"Dead!" chuckled the stranger. "No, he isn't. Not by a long chalk. He's very much alive, as I'm willing to swear to, seeing as I'm the identical individual myself. But he's not as prosperous as he ought to be, which is a great pity. However, I think that can be rectified. It's a long lane that hasn't a turning. Are you quite sure that you don't recognize me now, Mr. Skinner?"

The speaker leaned forward, parted his beard from about his mouth, and exhibited to the farmer a peculiar-looking tusk which projected from under his upper lip.

One look was enough for Amos Skinner.

With a hoarse cry of dismay he fell back in his chair

and regarded his visitor with a look of terror, as though a ghost of the past had suddenly risen before his startled eyes.

CHAPTER III.

THE PRICE OF SILENCE.

"I see you know me all right," said Jacob Luckstone, reaching forward and helping himself to a cigar out of a box that Mr. Skinner kept for his private consumption.

He bit off the end, picked a matchbox off the desk, lit the weed, and then settled back in the armchair to enjoy a good smoke, evidently a luxury to him.

"I heard that you was dead," said Mr. Skinner at last, with a little shiver.

"I came mighty near turning up my toes soon after you left the diggings. I had a run-in with a chap—an onery cuss. He got the drop on me and I went to the hospital for repairs. When I pulled through I took the five thou. you kindly presented me with and went to Mexico, where I stayed until I was finally cleaned out three months ago. Being reduced to my uppers I thought of you."

"Why of me?" asked the farmer, in shaky tones. "I thought you promised to cut me out of your mind when I paid you \$5,000 seven years ago for your silence as to a certain matter which I do not care to recall."

"Precisely!" replied his visitor. "I did promise; but when a fellow is on his last legs he kind of forgets such things as promises."

Mr. Skinner wiped the perspiration from his forehead.

"Then I suppose your object in coming East is to extort blackmail from me?" he said, with a ghastly look.

"You can call it by whatever name you chose," replied Luckstone, carelessly. "I want to get on my feet again. I can't do that without money. There's no one to give it to me but you; that's why I called on you."

"But I haven't——" began Mr. Skinner.

"Yes, you have," retorted Luckstone, calmly puffing at his cigar. "You've got money all right. You're well off, and won't miss a thousand or two."

Mr. Skinner uttered a dismal groan.

He could not bear the idea of parting with any of his darling dollars.

"What are you kicking about?" asked Luckstone, contemptuously. "Besides the \$20,000 you got for your share of the Rainbow claim, you made a good thing out of George——"

"Hush!" cried the farmer, imploringly. "Don't mention his name. I was mad when I——"

"Murdered——"

"No, no! I didn't murder him! I drugged him in order to——"

"Rob him of his money belt. Precisely. But he never recovered from the dose you gave him, so I have only got your word that you didn't intend to do him up for quits.

However, that was your lookout. Then you robbed him of his \$20,000, and I was lucky enough to catch you doing it. It was my duty to hand you over to the authorities. Had I done so your neck would have been stretched in short order. Fortunately for you I was open to reason in the shape of a bribe. We compromised on \$5,000, and you promised on your part to do something for Melville's wife and child when you got back home. Have you kept your word, Skinner?"

"Yes, yes; of course I did," replied the farmer, hurriedly.

"Well, let's hear what you did for them?" asked the visitor sharply.

"Why do you wish to know? It can't interest you in the least."

"But it does interest me, Mr. Skinner."

"Well, I helped them along from time to time, and when Mrs. Melville died, two years ago, I took the boy to educate and bring up at my own expense."

"I suppose you treat young Melville the same as you do your own son?" said Luckstone, sarcastically.

"Ahem! Not quite. You could hardly expect that. He attends school in the late fall, winter and early spring, and the rest of the time——"

"He works on your farm, same as any laborer, I s'pose."

"Well, yes; but I pay him for his time."

"You mean you have promised to pay him—when he gets to be twenty-one?"

"Why, why; what do you——"

"Look here, Skinner, you can't fool me. I met young Will Melville down by the creek not an hour ago, and we had quite a talk together."

"You met that boy!" exclaimed Mr. Skinner, growing pale again. "Why, how did you know him?"

"I didn't know him till he told me his name."

"How came you to talk to him?"

"I saw the boy coming up the creek in a sailboat. I wanted to learn where you lived, so I waited till he landed and then I asked him if he knew you. He said he did, that he lived with you. Then he pointed this house out to me. Something about the boy caused me to question him, and I learned a few things about you. He told me the story you brought from the West and repeated to his mother. He also told me that you never helped them to the extent of a single dollar, but that his mother had to take in sewing to support herself and him. When she died you took him to work on the farm at a small wage, which you are keeping back until he comes of age. That's the way you put it, but your idea is to prevent him from leaving you until you can get everything out of him you can. Isn't that it, Skinner?"

"No, no; I mean to deal fairly by him," said the farmer, hastily.

"I don't believe it," replied Jacob Luckstone, bluntly.

"I don't believe you are to be trusted. You said you would take care of George Melville's wife and son, and it's evident you haven't done so."

"You didn't tell the boy anything about——"

"His father?" grinned Luckstone, as he noted the anxious look on his companion's face. "No, not a thing. If I did what was right I would."

"No, you must not. I'll——"

"Well, go on. Spit it out," said the visitor as the farmer paused abruptly.

"I'll give you a couple of hundred dollars if you'll promise to go away and never bother me again," said Mr. Skinner with manifest reluctance.

"A couple of hundred dollars!" exclaimed Luckstone, contemptuously. "What's a couple of hundred dollars to me?"

"It's a lot of money," replied the farmer, in a tone that showed he regarded it as such.

"Look here, Skinner," said Luckstone in a decided way, as he chucked the butt of his cigar into the spittoon. "Let's get right down to business. I want to go back to Mexico. I've got a good thing waiting for me there; but I've got to have \$2,000 to develop it. Give me \$2,500, and the chances are you'll never see me again."

"Twenty-five hundred dollars!" gasped Mr. Skinner. "Do you want to ruin me?"

His visitor laughed sardonically.

"I'd venture to take my oath that \$2,500 is a mere fleebite to you. Why, man alive, you brought \$35,000 back with you from Cripple Creek, at least half of which rightfully belonged to George Melville's heirs. That was seven years ago. You ought to be worth all of \$50,000 to-day."

Mr. Skinner held up his hands protestingly.

"I say you are!" almost roared his visitor, his eyes twinkling angrily. "However, I don't care a picayune what you're worth. All I want of you is \$2,500. That I must and will have, or you can guess what'll happen. You see this document, don't you?" and Luckstone pulled a folded piece of paper out of his pocket and exhibited it to Mr. Skinner, who shrank from it as though it were a venomous snake. "Suppose I placed that in young Melville's hands, what would happen, do you think? It would be worth twice \$2,500—aye, more, to him to learn the truth about his father's fate. This paper in his hands would not only strip you of more than half your wealth, but land you behind the bars to boot, with something worse in prospect. I think I am letting you off easily. I ought to ask \$5,000 at least."

Mr. Skinner's face grew livid as he listened to Jacob Luckstone.

He knew the Westerner had him in his power.

Yet it was like pulling at his heartstrings to yield up a dollar.

He tried to think of some way out of his difficulty—some plan by which he could turn the tables on his visitor.

The effort, however, was a vain one.

He felt that while Luckstone lived he would always be at the man's mercy—always liable to his blackmailing devices, for he had no confidence in his visitor's assertion

that the present demand would probably be the final one. He groaned at the very thought of such a thing.

His money, which he loved better even than his own soul, would melt away under this rascal's subsequent demands, for who could say if he would ever put a limit to them while he lived.

The perspiration oozed out in great drops on the sorely pressed farmer's face and hands, so great was his mental disquietude.

While Mr. Skinner was communing with himself Jacob Luckstone helped himself to another cigar and lit it.

He felt that the game was in his own hands—that he held all of the trumps; that the money he wanted was as good as in his pocket.

But he reckoned without his host.

It is a dangerous piece of business to drive even a rat into a corner—how much more so a man.

CHAPTER IV.

SIMON TAKES A MEAN ADVANTAGE OF HIS FATHER.

"Well," said Jacob Luckstone, at length, after eying his man for several minutes in silence, "do I get the money, or don't I?"

"I haven't got but two hundred dollars in the house," replied Mr. Skinner, in a hollow voice. "You'll have to wait until I can get it."

"All right," replied his visitor in a tone of satisfaction. "I'll take the two hundred on account, and I'll drop around to-morrow for the balance."

"I'll get it for you," said the farmer, rising from his chair. "Wait here till I return."

"Oh, I'll wait, don't you worry about that," laughed the man from the West, putting his dust-stained boots on the chair just vacated by the owner of the house. "I've got him where the hair is short," he chuckled, as he watched Mr. Skinner walk from the room like a man who had just been stricken a heavy blow. "I'm sorry that I didn't make it \$5,000. He'd have to ante up just the same, or take the consequences. Come to think of it, if he really did defy me to do my worst, while I could put him into a mighty tight box, I should in all probability get myself in trouble along with him. I made myself an accessory to his crime when I accepted that bribe of \$5,000 to keep my mouth closed. It's a wonder he didn't think of that and use it in an effort to hold me off. He isn't smart even a little bit. In fact, he's a real easy mark. Well, \$2,500 isn't to be sneezed at when a fellow is as hard pushed as I am just now. I may make my fortune out of it."

He leaned back in his chair and indulged in sundry delightful air castles which he expected to realize as soon as the \$2,500 was in his possession.

After a short interval Mr. Skinner returned with bills

amounting to \$200 which he very reluctantly handed over to his visitor.

Jacob Luckstone shoved the money into a pocket of his vest and rose to go.

"Why, it's raining, isn't it? How far is it to the village hotel?"

"About two miles," replied Mr. Skinner.

"I don't mind a wetting much," said his visitor, with a short laugh, "for I'm used to roughing it; but I'd rather not present myself at the hotel looking like a drowned rat. My clothes aren't much to brag of at the best. If I look any worse they might refuse to take me in."

"You can remain here awhile until the rain lets up. I'll fetch you in some supper. I'd invite you to the table, but I don't think my wife would like it."

"I don't look highfaluting enough to suit her, eh?" grinned Luckstone. "Well, don't worry yourself about me. Bring me a bite of any old thing you have to spare and we'll let it go at that."

It was now growing dark, and Mr. Skinner lighted the lamp.

Presently the supper bell rang and he excused himself.

His visitor walked up and down the room thinking of the future after the farmer had withdrawn.

Occasionally he stopped before one of the windows and gazed out upon the darkening landscape.

The prospect was not particularly pleasant.

The rain seemed to have come to stay, for it was pouring down in torrents, as if the floodgates of heaven had been opened.

Everything looked dreary and soaked without.

"If it doesn't let up I'll have to ask Skinner to let me sleep in his barn with the horses to-night," soliloquized the Westerner.

Half an hour passed away and then the farmer appeared with a tray, followed by Simon, carrying a jug of milk.

He set the tray down on a table, motioned his son to withdraw, which he did with some reluctance, and then he told Luckstone to help himself.

The Westerner was pretty sharp set by this time, as he had eaten nothing since morning, so he accepted the invitation with alacrity and attacked the eatables forthwith.

There was nothing left but the dirty dishes and empty milk pitcher when, with a sigh of satisfaction, he pushed his chair back from the desk, grabbed another cigar and began to puff away at it with evident relish.

The rain continued to pour down unceasingly as if it never meant to let up.

Mr. Skinner walked nervously about the room, for he was anxious to get rid of his disreputable visitor.

At last Jacob Luckstone spoke:

"It doesn't look as if I could reach the village in this downpour. What's the matter with letting me bunk in your barn to-night?"

Mr. Skinner stopped in his restless walk and regarded his undesirable visitor in silence.

To let Jacob Luckstone sleep in his barn was out of the

question because Will Melville slept in a little room in the loft of the building which had been built for his accommodation, and the farmer did not want these two persons to have any further communication with each other lest results unpleasant to himself might come of it, for he placed no dependence whatever in the Westerner.

It was equally impossible that the man should sleep in the house, for not only would Mrs. Skinner object strenuously to any such arrangement, but the farmer himself did not at all relish having Luckstone on his premises throughout the night.

Where, then, could he put him, for as the case stood the man could not very well get to the village before morning unless Mr. Skinner hitched up a covered rig and took him there, which he had no idea of doing?"

While he was in this state of indecision he suddenly saw his way out of the difficulty.

There was a small disused two-story barn down near the river.

There was a considerable quantity of hay in the loft, and this would make a comfortable bed for a rough-and-ready person like Jacob Luckstone, who more times than he could remember had slept in far worse quarters.

Accordingly, Mr. Skinner told his visitor where he had decided to put him for the night.

This arrangement was satisfactory to the Western man, so the farmer got an umbrella and escorted Luckstone to the old barn and left him to turn in.

When Mr. Skinner returned to the house he found Simon in the library with a cigarette in his mouth and his heels on one of the window sills smoking away to beat the band.

This was a liberty that Simon had never been known to take before, and his father was so amazed at the sight that for a moment he was tongue-bound.

"Simon," he exclaimed, in an angry tone, "what does this mean? How dare you smoke cigarettes in my library? Take your feet from that window sill instantly."

"I'm very comfortable as I am, dad," replied the boy, in a tone that showed little respect for his father. "And I think this is as good a place to smoke as anywhere else."

Mr. Skinner was dumfounded at the words and attitude of his only son.

The boy had never acted towards nor spoken to him that way before.

"Simon Skinner, have you taken leave of your senses?" he demanded, more angry than ever. "I shall certainly chastise you severely for your disrespectful conduct."

"Oh, forget it. After this I'm going to be my own boss," said the boy flippantly.

Mr. Skinner turned fairly white with rage at these words.

"I'll teach you to know your place, you ungrateful——" he began, reaching out his arm to seize his son by the collar.

"Hold hard, dad," interrupted Simon, jumping to his

feet and backing out of the way. "Don't touch me, or I'll tell mother something you won't like her to know."

"What do you mean?" cried his father, regarding him with angry surprise.

"I mean that I have found out what brought that man, whose name is Jacob Luckstone, here this afternoon. I now know why he was so easy to me and so cock-sure you'd see him as soon as you heard he was outside. I know why Will Melville's father never——"

"Simon!" almost screamed Mr. Skinner.

"Oh, you can't shut my mouth, dad," said his son, independently. "I heard you admit that you drugged George Melville and then robbed him of his money belt containing \$20,000."

Mr. Skinner regarded his son with a livid face, but Simon took no notice of his emotion.

"Jacob Luckstone caught you at the trick and you had to give him \$5,000 to buy him off. Now he's back after more, and you've agreed to give him \$2,500. You seem to be in a nice pickle, blessed if you aren't."

"How—did—you—learn—all—that?" gasped out Mr. Skinner.

"How did I learn it?" snickered Simon. "Why, I was hidden under that window yonder, and I took in every word that passed between you two."

The farmer covered his face with his hands and sank into his chair at the desk with a heartbroken moan.

His cup of bitterness was indeed full, for he was disgraced and humiliated before his own son.

CHAPTER V.

THE TURNING POINT OF A LIFE.

Simon Skinner seemed to enjoy the advantage he had obtained over his father.

He had a mean, narrow nature that rejoiced in the discomfort of another—even though that other was his parent.

His father's distress did not seem to make much impression on him.

He leaned carelessly against the window sill and finished his cigarette.

Finally Mr. Skinner took his hands from his face and regarded the boy with a look of mute supplication.

"Simon," he said, in a broken tone, "promise me you'll never breathe a word of what you have heard this afternoon. Promise me that. You wouldn't ruin your father, would you?"

"Oh, I won't say a word," replied the boy, with a grin. "But you mustn't boss me about any more. That's a fair deal, isn't it?"

"Simon, you are taking an unfair advantage of your father. I have sinned, it is true, but it was for your sake as much as anything else."

"For my sake!" exclaimed the youth. "What do you mean by that, dad?"

"I committed that crime in order that one day you might be rich, Simon. I did not intend to cause George Melville's death. But I hated to think that Melville should return to Maywood as well off as myself. That his son would be on a par with you. When I saw that he had changed his gold into bills and carried them on his person instead of placing them in the bank, as I did with mine, the temptation to get hold of that money by some means, no matter how, impelled me to put up a job on him. He was an easy victim because he trusted me. If it hadn't been that I was caught in the act of taking the belt off his unconscious body by Jacob Luckstone, all would have been well."

"It's a wonder you didn't try to do him up, too, when you found he had you in his power," said Simon, in a crafty tone. "I'd have done it if I'd been in your shoes."

"No, no, my son; you wouldn't have added a real murder to an accidental one," said his father, feverishly.

"How do you know I wouldn't?" replied the boy, with a sneer. "I don't believe in letting anybody hold the bulge on me. Five thousand dollars was a lot of money to give up to a stranger. I think you was pretty easy for coughing up so readily. I don't wonder he came back after more. It's \$2,500 this time. How much will it be next time? I tell you, dad, you're a regular easy mark."

"I can't help myself. If he exposed me I should be arrested, the crime would be investigated, and in the end I might be hanged, for that man would swear I committed a deliberate murder to obtain Melville's money."

"How do you know anything could be proved against you after seven years?"

"Luckstone could do it. He took charge of Melville's body and disposed of it. He also compelled me to give him a written acknowledgment that I had administered a dose of chloral to my friend for the purpose of robbing him."

"That was foolish," said Simon, bluntly. "Do you suppose he has that paper yet?"

"I know he has. He showed it to me in this room."

"Look here, dad," said Simon, suddenly, his little eyes twinkling with a strange light. "Why don't you rid yourself entirely of this man now that you have the chance to do it?"

"What do you mean, Simon?" asked Mr. Skinner, in a tone of some surprise.

"What should I mean? You've got this fellow in your power, haven't you?"

"In what way?"

"You're very dense," replied his heir, contemptuously. "Didn't you take him down to the old barn by the river a little while ago?"

"I did."

"What did you take him there for?"

"He wanted a place to sleep, as it's too stormy for him to walk to the village."

"He's probably tired out with a day's tramp and asleep by this time, don't you think?"

"Very likely," replied the farmer, wondering what his son was driving at.

"Well, do you know what I would do if I was in your fix?" said the boy, significantly.

"What would you do?"

"I'd run him into a lunatic asylum and then I'd have that barn catch fire accidentally before morning. The wood inside is as dry as tinder, and there's a lot of straw on the lower floor, as well as a ton or two of hay in the loft. It would make a fine blaze."

"Do you mean to say that you would deliberately burn——"

"The barn up? I would as sure as I'm standing here. People would imagine he died in the fire. If he was as dangerous to me as he is to you, I'd put him where he could do me no harm."

"But that would be criminal," said Mr. Skinner, in a hushed tone.

"Self-preservation is the first law of nature, dad," grinned Simon. "I wrote those words so often in my writing book that I ain't forgotten them, nor what they stand for. Jacob Luckstone will never let up on you till one of you is out of the fight. He believes he's got an easy thing in you. It's up to you to show him that he's made a mistake. Quick work will rid you of Luckstone and save that \$2,300 balance you've promised to give him to-morrow. There now, dad, I shan't charge you anything for that pointer. You can do as you chose about it. I've told you what I would do if I was in your shoes. No man will ever drive me into a corner and hold me there. Not much. I'm going to bed. This is a splendid night for a man to sneak down to that old barn and carry the man off. It's dark as pitch and raining like fun. Nobody would ever see him."

Thus speaking, Simon walked out of the library, leaving his father alone with his thoughts.

* * * * *

"This is certainly a fierce night," said Will Melville, sitting up in his bed in the loft of the new barn, a hundred feet back of the farmhouse.

Usually he slept like a top from the moment he laid his head upon his pillow until the small alarm clock standing on a nearby shelf woke him up at five in the morning.

On this occasion the roar of the storm, which rocked the barn to its brick foundations, invaded his dreams, and finally the banging of a loosened shutter near the head of the bed startled him into wakefulness.

The furious wind drove the rain in sheets against the window panes, and whistled around the eaves of the barn.

Outside it was as dark as the caves of Erebus, and the uproar of the elements was something terrific.

"The river and the creek must be awful high to-night," he muttered, as he hopped out of bed, went to the window and tried to peer through the panes. "I wonder if my boat is safe?"

The dilapidated sailboat which he had tied up as usual in the creek late that afternoon, at the time he was addressed by Jacob Luckstone, and in which he had just then returned from Maywood with certain supplies he had obtained at the general store where the Skinner family traded, was Will's only possession on earth, and he thought a heap of it in consequence.

After watching the splashing of the rain against the glass for a few minutes, Will struck a match and looked at the clock.

It was just on the stroke of midnight.

The boy took another anxious glance out into the night and then returned to bed.

But he could not get to sleep again, strive as he would.

A spring storm like the one now in progress was always dreaded by the inhabitants of the Arlington Valley, especially when it followed a week of almost steady rain, as this one did.

Many a time in the past the people in that valley had to make a hurried escape from their homes when the swollen mountain streams had poured their waters against the dam above with such resistless force that it was carried away, and the rushing current swept down into the valley, converting the Maple River into a great inland sea for miles and miles around.

Buildings had been torn from their foundations, farm stock drowned, and an incalculable amount of damage inflicted on the dwellers along the middle of the valley.

Each time the dam had been repaired it had been greatly strengthened, but notwithstanding that fact the waters always managed to find a weak spot in it somewhere, and no matter how strong the dam was as a whole its real strength could only be measured by its weakest spot.

"The water has been flowing over the top of the dam for two days now," said Will to himself, as he listened to the rain beating down upon the sloping roof of the barn. "I noticed this afternoon that the river was unusually high and turbulent. The late reports from the mountains show that the streams there are swollen above their ordinary size even at this time of the year. I hope to-night's storm won't be the last straw. It would be a terrible thing if the dam was to give away again. We've escaped that peril for three years running now, and people have begun to feel safe once more. One thing is certain, however, even with the dam holding fast, that unless this rain stops soon the Maple River will overflow its banks and do considerable damage. I am sure the creek where my boat is must be unusually swollen at this moment. If she should break loose from her moorings the chances are I'd never see her again. I wish I had tied her higher up the creek."

As the moments flew away the storm seemed rather to increase than diminish, and in like proportion Will's anxiety for the safety of his little sailboat increased.

"No use talking, I simply can't go to sleep with this thing on my mind," he said at last, sitting bolt upright again. "I've a great mind to dress and go down to the creek. That old rubber horse blanket will keep me dry

enough. I must make sure of my boat. If I should lose that I wouldn't be able to get its mate in a hurry, and about all the pleasure I have in life I get out of it."

So Will jumped out of bed again, hurriedly dressed himself, and, taking the rubber horse cloth from its peg on the wall, ran lightly downstairs.

Wrapping the waterproof as snugly about his person as he could, he sallied forth into the night and storm through a small rear door of the barn.

He expected to be back in a very short time, just as soon as he had hauled his boat up to the head of the creek, and secured her to a stout tree standing near the edge of the bank.

Fate, however, decreed that it would be many a day before Will Melville saw the Skinner barn again.

In fact, as the boy stepped out of the building he had, all unknown to himself, reached a turning point in his young life, and from that hour a new career awaited him which would set its mark on all his after existence.

CHAPTER VI.

SAVED BY A HAIR.

The short cut Will took to reach the creek carried him past the old disused barn where Jacob Luckstone had for some hours been sleeping as peacefully as a child.

There was no thought of any danger threatening him that night on the Westerner's mind.

If the idea had occurred to him he would have laughed it down contemptuously.

It would have seemed too ridiculous that after carrying his life in his hands for a score of years in the woolly West, and later in the fastnesses of the Mexican frontier among the most reckless class of Greaser desperadoes, death should flap its sable wings above him here in this peaceful valley of the civilized East.

And yet this was a fact.

Death had never been nearer Jacob Luckstone than it was at the moment Will Melville approached the old barn in which the man was now sleeping.

And death, too, was brooding ominously over the Arlington Valley that night.

It was about to appear in different shapes almost at the same moment.

To Luckstone in the guise of the fire fiend, defying the drenching rain from above, but egged on by the howling blast; to the sleeping inhabitants of the valley in the resistless sweep of the hitherto imprisoned waters of the dam beyond the village of Maywood, for all unsuspected it had insidiously undermined one particular point of the stout masonry erected to shackle its strength, and the dam was slowly but surely yielding to its might.

As Will was about to pass the old barn his watchful eye

caught the gleam of a shaft of light through a crack in the door.

He stopped short and gazed in wonder at the building. What could it mean?

Had a tramp or two taken shelter from the storm inside?

It must be so, for no one had any business in there at that hour.

"I'll take a squint and see who is in there anyway. If it is a tramp, and he is smoking, I'll have to warn him against the danger of setting fire to the old tinder-box."

Will therefore marched up to the door and peered through a knothole which furnished an uninterrupted view of the ground floor.

In the middle of the floor stood a lighted lantern, while some person, whom the boy did not immediately recognize, was piling up the dry straw thickly about the foot of the rough ladder which led to the loft.

Great wads of straw had also been heaped upon each step of the stairs.

"What in thunder is the man doing?" exclaimed Will to himself. "Surely he can't mean to set the barn on fire, and yet that is what he seems to be bent upon doing. Is this person an escaped lunatic, or what is he?"

As the man inside turned to gather another huge armful of the straw from a pile in one end of the place, the light of the lantern flashed full upon his ghastly countenance.

Will started back in consternation.

The face he saw was the face of Amos Skinner.

"Great Scott!" cried Will. "Why is he about to destroy this old barn on such a night and at such an hour? There are a couple of tons of good hay in the loft, too. It isn't at all like Mr. Skinner to sacrifice even a small bit of his property. Why, I've known him to go wild when a short afternoon rain slightly damaged the top of a single haystack. I can't understand this at all. It can't be that he's walking in his sleep and doesn't realize what he is doing."

In some excitement Will kept his eye glued to the knothole and watched the incendiary preparations of the owner of the barn.

Mr. Skinner seemed to walk about on his tiptoes, as if fearful of making any sound on the board flooring.

He continued to heap the straw about the ladder until he had a thick pile as high as his head.

"He seems determined to make a sure thing of it at any rate," breathed Will. "Well, it's his funeral, not mine. If he wants to burn the barn down he has a perfect right to do so if he sees fit, for nobody will suffer but himself."

How different would the boy's thoughts have been if he could have looked into the loft above at that moment!

He would have seen a strong man, in the full flush of health, fast asleep on the hay, utterly unconscious of the fate in store for him, and his boyish heart would have stood still with horror.

He would have slammed open the door, grasped Mr.

Skinner by the arm, and called his attention to the presence of that man whom he would have recognized as the person who had spoken to him down by the creek that afternoon.

Will, however, forgot all about the object which had called him from his bed at that late hour in the interest that Mr. Skinner's ominous preparations had excited in his mind.

If there was going to be a bonfire he wanted to see it, too, now that he was on the scene.

He didn't care, though, that the farmer should find him watching him.

Mr. Skinner wasn't in the habit of treating him any too well, and it was more than likely that if he caught him out of the big barn he would handle him without gloves, and the boy wasn't anxious for a run-in with his employer.

His curiosity held him to the spot, but he was well on his guard.

Mr. Skinner scattered the balance of the straw about the floor and then took up his lantern.

He opened the slide and took out the candle.

Will wondered at the ghastly look which rested on the farmer's features.

He wondered still more when he saw Mr. Skinner look up at the opening in the loft and shake his clenched fist in a threatening way at it.

It was hardly the act of a sane man, and a suspicion that the farmer had suddenly gone mad, and his intention to fire his own property seemed some evidence of that supposition, flashed across Will's mind.

Then Mr. Skinner applied the candle flame to the straw in different places.

It took fire instantly, and the flames spread with great rapidity, curling up the ladder in red tongues which ignited the batches of straw further up.

His last act was to thrust the lighted candle under the straw at the base of the ladder and leave it there. Then he started for the door.

Will thought it was time for him to get out of range, and he hurriedly jumped behind a big oak tree which threw one of its great branches above the old doomed barn.

Mr. Skinner came rushing out as though the fire-fiend himself was at his heels, and he threw the door wide open in order to create a huge draft.

He stood for a moment in the broadening glow of the furnace his hand had called into being, and again shook his clenched fist at the loft.

"Now, Jacob Luckstone, we'll see who is the winner—you or I? In a few minutes the earth and myself will both be well rid of you forever—forever, do you hear?" he screamed. "It is a thousand pities you have \$200 of my good money in your clothes at this moment. It has got to go, but at least I have the satisfaction of knowing that you will go with it. May you wake up in perdition, blast you!"

For the third time Mr. Skinner shook his hand at the loft and then he melted away in the direction of his house.

Will had heard every word he uttered, and they seemed incomprehensible to him.

"One would think there was some enemy in that building he was trying to destroy," breathed the boy. "What could he mean by saying, 'Now, Jacob Luckstone, we'll see who is the winner?'" thought Will, watching the sea of fire which now had full swing in the lower floor. "Who is Jacob Luckstone? There's no such person in this neighborhood, I'll swear."

Hardly were the words out of his mouth before he heard a terrible cry for help—and the cry surely came from the loft of the doomed barn.

"Great heaven!" cried Will. "That was a human cry. It sounded from in there, too. What can it mean?"

The cry was repeated with greater intensity than before. Will rushed to the door and looked in.

The whole interior was now on fire from end to end.

Great tongues of flame were reaching up through the open trap into the loft.

"Help, help, for the love of heaven!" came in tones of strong anguish through the opening.

"My goodness! There is some one up there. His only chance to escape is to burst open that closed wooden shutter above. Why doesn't he do it?"

The screams of the imprisoned man now grew agonizing.

He pounded frantically on the walls and on the closed window shutter, but he did not seem to know how to open the latter from within.

"Help! Help! I am burning to death! Help in heaven's name!"

"I must help him somehow," cried Will, casting the rubber covering from him. "It must be some tramp who went up there to sleep; but I cannot see even a tramp perish without lending him a helping hand. How shall I reach him? Ah, the tree!"

In a moment Will was shinning up the thick trunk of the great oak.

Never before had he climbed a tree with greater speed and energy.

But now he had reason for speed, for a human life was in dire peril.

He swung himself out on the limb which extended above the roof of the barn.

Dropping down on the wet and slippery roof, he crawled up until he was above the closed shutter of the loft.

Letting himself down till his feet were in a suitable position, he began to kick away vigorously at the shutter.

The man inside heard him and rushing up to it cried: "Save me! For heaven's sake, save me! The fire has reached the loft. I am nearly suffocated."

"Open the window," cried Will.

"How can I?"

"Turn the bar that holds it, and push it open."

Luckstone fumbled about through the smoke which was choking him, grasped the wooden bar and tried to turn it. It was stiff, however, from disuse and resisted his efforts.

He tugged frantically at it, his breast heaving, and the perspiration standing out on his forehead in great drops.

The flooring under his boots was growing terribly hot, and the smoke-charged atmosphere was becoming more and more stifling.

Behind him the hay was blazing up furiously, and the flames were creeping toward him with relentless certainty.

"I can't get it open," he groaned.

"You must get it open," cried Will. "Your life depends on it. It is your only way of escape."

He thumped again, harder than before, with his shoes on the shutter, in an effort to loosen the bar inside.

Inside Luckstone continued his desperate fight for life.

His efforts, however, were each moment becoming weaker.

"I'm dying!" he groaned, as he gave a last wrench to the bar just as Will administered a heavy kick from the outside.

The bar came loose, revolved and Luckstone with a gasp fell against it, forcing it partly open.

Will kicked it entirely open.

"Now jump out," he cried, preparing to follow himself.

Luckstone was beyond the effort.

He lay gasping in the opening, his dazed eyes turned up at the brave boy, clinging to the roof above, while the fire, now at his feet, was catching the edges of his trousers.

Will, looking down, saw how it was with him.

He saw he would have to help the man out or he would be lost.

So he let himself down into the window with the help of the shutters.

Straddling the sill, he exerted all his strength and pulled and pushed the man out of the window.

Luckstone fell all in a heap into the water-soaked grass below.

Then, as Will sprang after him, the flames followed him through the window and shot up through the roof, lighting up the vicinity for a hundred feet around.

CHAPTER VII.

WHAT JACOB LUCKSTONE TOLD WILL MELVILLE.

As soon as Will alighted on the ground he seized Luckstone by the arms and drew the half unconscious man away from the burning barn into a cowshed near at hand.

He had been nearly strangled by the smoke in the loft, and it was some minutes before he could articulate well enough to thank his young preserver.

By that time the barn was ablaze from foundation to roof, the flames rising fifty feet into the air, accompanied by great volumes of thick black smoke.

By the glare of the fire Will recognized, greatly to his surprise, the man who had accosted him at the creek that afternoon.

Luckstone also realized that he was indebted for his life to Will Melville, the son of the man Mr. Skinner had so basely treated out in Cripple Creek, and to which crime he himself was to all intents and purposes an accomplice.

"You have saved my life, Melville," he said, in a weak voice, catching the boy's wet hand in his and pressing it warmly. "I don't deserve this favor of you, my lad, though I'm mighty glad you came to my assistance. Another minute and it would have been all over with me. I can't understand how the place caught afire. Skinner will be sure to blame it all on me in the morning. He'll say I was smoking, and that I dropped a lighted match in the hay."

"How can he blame you, sir. He couldn't have known you were in the building."

"Couldn't have known it! Why, of course he knew it. Didn't he bring me here himself, so I could pass the night in the loft, as it was impossible for me to walk to the village in this storm?"

"Mr. Skinner brought you here to sleep in the loft of that barn?" cried Will, in the utmost astonishment.

"He certainly did."

The man evidently spoke the truth—yet his very truthfulness raised an appalling question in Will's mind.

If Mr. Skinner had brought this man, who had so narrowly escaped a terrible death in the flames, to the barn to pass the night there, then he must have known he was in the building when he deliberately set it on fire.

What then was the inference?

That for some reason his object had been to murder this stranger.

Will could not bring himself to believe anything like that of his employer.

He knew that Mr. Skinner had his shortcomings, but that such a terrible thing as murder should enter into his thoughts did not seem reasonable.

Suddenly Will recalled the strange, threatening words uttered by the farmer when he stood for a moment in front of the barn he had just fired.

Those words—at least the few the boy could recollect—were to this effect:

"Now, Jacob Luckstone, we'll see who is the winner—you or I?" In a few minutes the earth and myself will both be rid of you forever."

Those words were certainly significant of a deadly purpose.

Was this man's name Jacob Luckstone?

If he was, then the picture looked very black against Mr. Skinner.

Will determined to see what light this man could throw on the matter.

"Is your name Jacob Luckstone?" he said, rather abruptly.

"It is," admitted the Westerner.

"You are acquainted with Mr. Skinner?"

"I am."

"He brought you to that barn to sleep, you say?"

"Yes."

"Do you regard Mr. Skinner as a friend?"

"Well, hardly that," chuckled Luckstone.

"Have you any reason to suspect that he would want to injure you?"

"Why do you ask that question, Melville?" the West-erner asked, clearly startled.

"For the best of reasons, Mr. Luckstone," replied Will, gravely.

"What are your reasons?"

"If you will answer my question I will tell you."

"Well, I haven't the least fear that Skinner would try to injure me—he's too much of a coward for that; but I'll tell you frankly that I believe he would hail the news of my death with a great deal of satisfaction."

"I'm afraid, Mr. Luckstone, that you underestimate Mr. Skinner's courage, for it was he who set that barn on fire to-night, and I saw him do it."

"You saw Skinner set fire to that barn? You actually saw him do that?" asked Luckstone, hardly believing the evidence of his ears.

"I did. Listen and I will tell you the whole story."

Will then told Luckstone what he had seen of Mr. Skinner's actions in the old barn which culminated in his setting fire to the building.

The man from the West uttered an angry oath when the boy had finished his story.

"The sneaky scoundrel!" he ejaculated. "So he meant to do me up for good! I won't do a thing to him for this! Thought he'd save that \$2,300 balance, did he? Well, I'll have no mercy on him now. I'll ruin the villain and send him to prison if there's law and justice in this land. Even if it costs me my own freedom to do it. Will Melville, you saved me from becoming a victim to that rascal's perfidy. I mean to show my gratitude by seeing that you get your rights."

"Get my rights! What do you mean?" asked the surprised boy.

"You shall know to-morrow. You shall hear the whole truth."

"The whole truth about what?"

"About the wrong that man did your father out in Cripple Creek."

Will uttered a gasp of surprise.

"Explain what you mean, Mr. Luckstone," cried the boy, grasping the man eagerly by the arm. "What do you know about my father?"

"I won't tell you now. All I will say at present is that your father's death lies directly at Amos Skinner's door, and that much of that man's prosperity was built upon the money that rightfully belonged to your mother and yourself. Skinner has deeply wronged you, boy, and I am sorry to say that I abetted in the transaction for the sake of the money I gained by so doing. But that wrong must now be righted. Skinner shall be made to disgorge. He shall be brought to book for your father's death, and for his attempt on my life to-night. You are my witness for

the latter, I will be your witness for the former. Between us, my lad, we will put the villain through."

"Do you really mean that Mr. Skinner was responsible for my father's death?"

"I do."

"And yet I always understood he was my father's friend."

"He was a false, treacherous friend. Your father trusted him and was betrayed."

"I can hardly realize that what you accuse Mr. Skinner of is the truth," said Will, in a troubled voice.

"Haven't your own eyes shown you to-night what Amos Skinner is capable of? Did you not see him go to work with the utmost deliberation to murder me?"

"Yes," admitted the boy.

"I am the only witness who can bring him to book for the crime against your father. I am a dangerous man to his interests. I have him hard and fast under my thumb. For these reasons he naturally wanted to sweep me from his path. He has failed, thanks to you. It was a lucky thing for both of us that you happened to be on hand to defeat his purpose. From this hour I will sink my own interests in yours. I will no longer use my power over that rascal for my own gain, but I will exert all my efforts to see that your father is avenged, and that you shall receive what is justly yours."

"Do you mean to assert that Mr. Skinner defrauded my father of his money, too?"

"I mean to say in the plainest of words that he deliberately robbed your father of his share of the money received from the sale of the Rainbow Claim, the sum of \$20,000."

"Twenty thousand dollars!"

"Ah, \$20,000!"

"How do you know this?"

"Because I caught him in the act of doing it."

"You did. And you never——"

"Brought him to account for it? No, I now regret to say that I did not. Instead of doing that I accepted \$5,000 of that money as the price of my silence."

"You did?"

"I did."

Will regarded Jacob Luckstone with a look of aversion.

"If all you say is true, you are almost as guilty as Mr. Skinner."

"I do not deny it; but your father was almost a stranger to me, and I did not have any part in the plot against him."

"Have I your word for this?"

"You have."

"Do you know how my father met his death? Was he pushed over a precipice?"

"No. Skinner drugged him with a dose of chloral. He asserted that he did not actually mean to kill him—merely intended to stupefy his victim so he could rob him of his money with safety. But I have only his word for this."

"Mother told me that my father was found mangled at

the foot of a precipice. Mr. Skinner told her that in his opinion some desperadoes must have learned that my father carried his money around his person in a belt; that he believed they lured him to that lonesome spot, attacked and robbed him, and then threw his body down the mountain to get rid of it. He identified my father's corpse by his clothes."

"A man resembling your father in build and dress was found as you have described and buried in his name after Skinner's evidence was taken; but it may not have been your father just the same."

"May not! Then you have no idea what became of my father after he was——"

"Drugged by Skinner!"

Luckstone regarded the boy with a curious expression for a moment.

"Boy, you shall know the truth. Listen! I took your father in his unconscious condition to my cabin. He was apparently all but dead, and I agreed to bury him secretly as soon as the breath had left his body. Your father, however, did not die."

"Did not die!" exclaimed Will, in a tense tone.

"No. He came to himself on the following day, but his mind was gone from the effects of the overdose of poison he had received. How long he would remain in that condition I could not tell, but that he would not die seemed certain. This placed me in a quandary. His ultimate recovery would spoil my future plans with regard to Skinner, whom I meant to bleed if I should ever need money. Yet I could not bring myself to complete that rascal's villainy. I had already decided to go to Mexico with my \$5,000. I went, but I took your father with me, for he was as docile as a child."

"You took my father to Mexico!"

"I did. He recovered his health, though his mind remained a complete blank as to the past."

"And where is my father to-day?" cried Will, with feverish eagerness. "Is he still——"

"Alive? Yes, and in excellent health. But Skinner must never know the truth. He must be made to——"

At that moment a terrible roar sounded up the valley.

The dam had given away at last!

CHAPTER VIII.

THE FLOOD.

"What's that?" exclaimed Jacob Luckstone, pausing in his last speech and gripping Will by the arm.

The storm was still at its height, while the fire had so far subsided that the rain was beating the last of it into a mass of blackening embers.

The boy held his breath and listened.

He was afraid to say what he was thinking.

He could hear a mile or more away what seemed to his excited fancy the onward rush of a great body of water.

If this was the truth then the big dam had given away and Arlington Valley would soon be flooded from end to end.

"The dam," he said in a hoarse whisper at last.

"What dam? What are you talking about?" asked the Westerner impatiently.

"The dam above the village I fear has given away."

"Well, s'pose it has? We're not in any danger, are we?"

"We should be swept off our feet by the flood and probably drowned."

"Then let's get somewhere else."

"We'll go to my boat in the creek. I want to attend to it anyway."

"I'm with you," said Luckstone.

They set out at once for the creek, only a short distance away.

Will found his sailboat all right, though the creek had risen more than a foot since he was there that afternoon.

"Get into the cuddy," he said to his companion. "I'll follow you as soon as I hitch the boat higher up."

Will released the boat's painter and pulled the little craft up to the head of the creek, where he fastened the line to a stout tree close to the edge of the bank, now scarcely a foot above the water line.

Then he jumped on board and hastened under cover.

It was but the work of a few moments to feel for matches, which he always kept in a certain place and light the lantern at the forward end of the cuddy.

This gave a bright illumination to the interior.

From under one of the lockers he produced a red papiermache bucket and placed it in the center of the floor.

Taking off his jacket he began to squeeze the superfluous moisture into it, and advised his companion to do the same.

"This isn't a bad place to spend the balance of the night," remarked Luckstone, looking about the cosy cuddy. "Whose boat is it, Skinner's?"

"No, it's mine," replied Will, as he hung his jacket up to dry. "Not much to brag of, I'll admit, but still it's all mine—the only thing I ever owned."

As the boy spoke the sailboat, which had been riding uneasily at her moorings, rose up suddenly, as if propelled into the air from underneath.

Then she shot backward, as far as her painter would let her go, and fetched up with a jerk that sent both Will and Luckstone sprawling in a heap on the floor.

The shock caused the line to snap short off close aboard, and when the boy and his companion picked themselves up both realized that the boat was adrift.

Will rushed to the slide, or cuddy door, which he had almost shut to keep out the rain, shoved it open and looked out.

Clearly the little craft was moving along upon the surface of a body of water at a smart pace.

Will unshipped the lantern and raised it at arm's length outside the cuddy.

By its glow the boy could see an agitated mass of water on both sides.

He was now sure that the dam had given away, for nothing but a heavy onrush of water from above the village could have overflowed the creek and torn the sailboat from her anchorage, sending her drifting down the valley at the mercy of the stream.

The rain was still coming down in torrents, driven hither and thither by the blast, and the night was so dark that Will had no idea of the extent of the flood.

It was useless for him to think of taking measures to guide the craft, as he could not see a yard one way or the other.

"We'll have to take our chances of fetching up against any obstruction that happens to get in our way," he said to Luckstone, as he returned the lantern to its hook. "It is simply a matter of blind luck with us now. I can't tell whether we're on the river at this moment or are moving over the body of the valley. If the former, we're comparatively safe; if the latter, we're liable at any moment to butt up against a building or some kind of a tree, or in fact any old thing in our road."

"From the way you put it the prospect isn't over cheerful," said Luckstone.

"No, it isn't," replied Will.

"Then that dam you spoke about has really gone to pieces?"

"There isn't much doubt about it."

"Ever happen before?"

"Many times."

"Why don't they make the dam strong enough to hold back the water?"

"They've been strengthening it for years, but somehow the water manages to get the better of the situation. This, however, is the first break in three years. It has been the general opinion this spring that there wouldn't be any more floods—that the valley was safe at last; but just the same we're up against it again. Lots of damage will be done before the waters subside."

"That is generally the case with floods. If we don't meet with any——"

Obstruction, he was going to say, but just at that moment the boat ran into some floating object, and the words were choked back down his throat.

No damage was done, however.

For awhile the boat floated on down the submerged valley as before, then with a slight shock she came to a stop.

Will went to the cuddy door again and looked out.

At first he could see nothing but the opaque darkness all around, then he made out the shivering branches of a big tree in which the mast had caught.

"We're anchored in a tree," he said to his companion over his shoulder.

"Will it hold the boat against the tide?" asked Luckstone.

"That is rather doubtful."

"Have you a rope aboard to make fast to the trunk?"

"Yes, I've a spare line," replied Will. "I'll make the boat secure if I can."

"I'll help you," said the Westerner.

Between them they succeeded in securing the sailboat to the trunk of the tree, so that if the flood swung her loose from the branches, as it was very likely to do in time, they would still swing at anchor.

"This is safer than being swept along at the mercy of the water," said the boy after the job had been completed. "We shan't run into anything now and be upset."

"But something may run into us, just as we ran into the tree, and send us to the bottom."

"That's true," answered Will; "but in that case we can climb into the tree, which is pretty solid, I guess."

Removing their soaked garments and wrapping themselves in a blanket apiece, which Will had in a locker, they reclined upon the floor near each other.

The rain still beat down on the top of the little cabin with unabated vigor, the driving blast whistled through the limbs of the tree, and the light boat bobbed up and down on the uneasy surface of the water.

As the excitement of their situation somewhat subsided, Will was eager to talk about his father in far-away Mexico, but Luckstone said he was tired and wanted to get a little more rest if he could.

The boy was greatly disappointed, but as the man wouldn't talk he had to submit for the present.

It wasn't long before Luckstone dropped off to sleep, and though Will, conscious of the danger of their position, tried to keep his eyes open, he, too, yielded to the influence of the drowsy god.

Fortunately nothing happened to imperil the sailboat during the remaining hours of darkness, and the sleepers were not disturbed.

CHAPTER IX.

A RESCUE AND A WRECK.

Morning broke at last over the Arlington Valley.

What a change had taken place there since the preceding day.

The narrow Maple River, which wound down from the northern to the southern end of the valley, had expanded into an inland sea, covering every bit of the low ground in sight.

The same old scenes of ruin and chaos which had accompanied the former floods were repeated.

The ground floors of a score or more of farmhouses were more or less submerged, while the smaller outbuild-

ings, not so securely fixed to the earth, had become dislodged and floated away with the current.

Barns rose out of the water here and there, like Noahs Arks aground, and small orchards showed only their bare branches above the surface.

The village of Maywood, being largely built on higher ground, escaped the worst features of the flood, the cellars only being flooded and the streets awash.

The storm had partially subsided when Will woke up and went to the door of the cuddy to look out.

It was still raining hard, and the wind was swaying the branches of the tree to which the sailboat was tied.

Dark and sullen clouds hung low in the heavens, and the prospect of the weather changing for the better was not encouraging.

Still the light of day had banished the greater terror of darkness and uncertainty which had tortured the inhabitants of the valley since the flood first came upon them like a thief in the night.

Will got into his half-dried clothes as quickly as he could, and by that time Jacob Luckstone woke up and proceeded to do likewise.

"How's things this morning?"

"Pretty fierce," replied Will. "The valley is almost wholly flooded. I don't think it was ever worse."

"Whew! What a change in a night!" exclaimed the Westerner when he looked out on the landscape himself. "The village, as near as I can make out, seems to be all right."

"Yes. It is on high ground."

"A lucky thing for the inhabitants. The river has risen to their doors, however. Can you see Skinner's place from here?"

"No. It's around yonder line of trees."

"I s'pose he's flooded out with the rest."

"The fields are under water to some extent, and his cellar is full up, I guess; but he will suffer less than the majority, owing to the lay of his land."

"What are we going to do?"

"Get up sail and make for Maywood."

"All right. I'll help you all I can. We seem to be in for another ducking, for it's still raining good and hard."

Will led the way outside, and Luckstone helped him take the stops off the sail.

After that they cut loose from the tree and raised the sail with a couple of reefs in it.

Hardly had they got underway before Will caught sight of a woman waving a handkerchief at them from one of the lower windows of a partially submerged house.

He could also see a child's face peeping out above the window sill.

The building was about a quarter of a mile away, and seemed in imminent danger of collapsing, for it rocked visibly every time the wind swooped down upon it.

"My gracious! Look yonder," said Will, calling his companion's attention to the house and its two occupants. "We'll have to go to their rescue."

He headed the boat across the stretch of intervening water.

"That building looks as if it was just about to go afloat," said Luckstone.

"That's what it does. And that's just what it will do very soon," answered Will. "It's lucky for them that we are close at hand."

The boy ran the sailboat as close as he could to the window, which was not more than a foot above the water, and, handing the helm over to Luckstone, he grabbed the window sill with both hands and drew the craft close against the house.

"Now step in, madam," he said to the woman.

"I can't," she replied. "I am crippled. You will have to assist me."

"All right," replied Will. "I'll take the little girl first."

He put out one leg to straddle the sill when a sudden gust of wind tore down on the house, wrenched the boat from under him and left him up to his waist in the flood, clinging to the window.

"Look out," he cried to the woman. "I've got to scramble in."

He performed this maneuver with the agility of a monkey and straddled the window sill.

Then he looked around for the boat and perceived it a dozen yards off, sweeping away on the tide.

He shouted to Luckstone to starboard the helm, but the man from the West was all at sea in a sailboat.

He didn't know the first thing about managing one and seemed to be as helpless in the craft as an infant.

"Your boat is leaving us," exclaimed the woman, in anxious tones.

"I'm afraid my companion doesn't understand how to handle her," he said. "My gracious! She's over!" he cried, in some excitement.

Another blast had pounced upon the sailboat and capsized her, throwing Luckstone into the water.

He caught hold of the boom, however, and the last seen of him and the boat, as they were swept far down the stream, showed him to be in the same position, holding on for dear life.

"Oh, what shall we do?" cried the woman, in a paroxysm of fear. "This house may tumble over any moment, and we shall all be drowned."

"I hope not, ma'am," Will tried to reassure her. "It rocks some, but I think the storm is blowing over."

The room was a complete wreck.

The lighter portions of the furniture were overturned and almost entirely covered by the water.

The plaster on the walls was cracked in a dozen spots, and in one place a couple of square feet of it had fallen out altogether.

The pictures still hung from their nails, but they were all askew.

Although the boy tried to make the situation look as

cheerful as he could, yet in his own heart he feared the building was going to collapse very soon.

He went to one of the other windows and looked out to see if there was the ghost of a chance of escape in that direction, but he couldn't see any.

From certain well-defined indications the water seemed to be over his head.

Suddenly he saw two men in a rowboat a short distance away.

They were pulling down toward a big house half a mile distant.

Will threw up the window and shouted to them until at length he attracted their attention.

They immediately altered their course and stood for the house.

"There's a boat coming for us," said the boy, dashing across the room to the spot where the woman and the child sat on the top of a table.

They did not hear him, however, for at that moment a sweeping blast struck the building so violently that Will felt the house lift up and shift its position.

It settled down again at an angle, as if a portion of the foundation had given away, and there it rocked to and fro.

The woman and child both screamed with affright.

They seemed to think the building was about to sink under the water.

Will grabbed the woman's crutch and placing his arm under her told her to cling to his neck.

Then he caught the little girl by the hand, bade her jump into the water, and thus encumbered started for the opposite window as the building reeled once more under another blast.

The crippled woman clung to Will in a state of abject terror.

Just when the wobbling house seemed on the point of turning completely over into the rushing waters help suddenly appeared at the open window.

The crippled woman, perched on the brave boy's shoulder, and the little girl uttered a glad cry.

One of the men in the boat stood up, seized the window jambs and steadied the craft, while the other endeavored to overcome the sweep of the tide with the oars.

Will soon reached the window with the helpless woman and little girl.

He passed each in turn carefully through the window to the man outside, who placed them in the center of the boat.

Then Will leaped on the sill to follow, when the roaring wind once more came sweeping down on the house.

As he grabbed the window to steady himself the house went over on its side, throwing him into the water, and he was swept away like a cork.

CHAPTER X.

BOUND WEST.

Will was a good swimmer and thus managed to keep himself afloat as soon as he came to the surface.

How long he could have managed to do this, impeded as he was by his clothes, is a question, but fortunately he was not put to the test, for a log came within his reach pretty soon and he seized hold of it.

This buoyed him up and he allowed things to take their course, as he could not very well do otherwise.

He was swept down the valley with the other debris on the stream.

He saw several boats rowing to different houses, but he was too far off to attract their attention.

The rain beat down on his face and the wind buffeted the log, but through it all the boy clung to it desperately as his only salvation.

Mile after mile he was carried along in this fashion, until he became sensible of a growing feeling of exhaustion.

Once he tried to get astride of the log, but it rolled over and dumped him off on the opposite side, nearly shaking him from his hold.

When he reached that stage that he feared he could hold on no longer he made out the top of a small shed swimming just ahead of him.

Here was a chance not to be neglected.

Summoning all his remaining energy, he abandoned the log, swam to the shed and pulled himself on top of it.

Quite exhausted, he stretched himself upon it, and, heedless of rain and wind, he lay there for fifteen minutes without stirring.

At last he sat up and looked around.

He was now miles down the valley from the neighborhood of Maywood.

On every side there were evidences of the severity of the flood.

He saw a raft at a distance with a whole family and a part of their household belongings heaped upon it.

One rowboat he saw also loaded with women and making for the nearest shore.

The storm seemed to be breaking up, for the wind wasn't quite so strong as before, and it had ceased raining.

The sky, however, looked as threatening as ever.

For an hour longer the shed held on its course in the middle of the stream, then as it approached the end of the valley it drew close in to the shore, at a point where the Maple River itself turned a spur in the hills.

"I might as well stick to this craft as long as it floats, for I wouldn't know where to walk to if I landed down here," said Will to himself. "Besides if I keep on I may eventually come up with Mr. Luckstone, if he was not drowned. The whole object of my life now is to reach Mexico and meet my father. I am afraid I never will be able to accomplish my purpose unless I can come across that Westerner again. He seems to be friendly toward me and disposed to work in my interest. It is probable if we miss each other he will return to that country. In that case I must go there, too, and hunt around until I can find some trace of him."

Will had not a very clear idea how he would be able to

reach Mexico, which was thousands of miles away; but he had confidence in the old adage that where there is a will there is a way.

After passing the bend in the stream the shed was carried out from shore again, and for hours kept on its course till it reached the main part of the Maple River.

A few miles below Will was carried by a big manufacturing and railroad town.

Here he was discovered by a sloop bound down the river and rescued from his precarious situation.

He was half-famished by this time, and glad to accept the rough hospitality offered by the skipper of this craft.

He told the story of the flood in the Arlington Valley so far as he was acquainted with its details, and the captain promised to land him in the morning at Reedsburg, a good-sized city, whither the sloop was bound.

He was advised to turn into a spare bunk in a dark hole forward, which was called the fore-castle, and was glad to avail himself of the suggestion.

Next morning at ten o'clock he stepped ashore at Reedsburg, a stranger in a strange place, and without a penny in his pocket.

He had now given up all hope of an immediate meeting with Luckstone.

"The only thing I can do is to work my way to Mexico. It may take me some time to do that, but I'll get there all right," he muttered pluckily. "The first thing I must do is to capture a job of some kind. I've got to eat or starve, and I s'pose it's up to me to work for my victuals."

It wasn't easy for a strange, ill-attired boy to pick up employment in a place where he was a total stranger.

Will tried hard that afternoon to get something to do, but was unsuccessful.

Hungry and tired he stopped before a small eating-house just as the shades of night were falling and looked wistfully in at the door at the people at the tables.

Finally he mustered up the courage to strike the proprietor for a sandwich.

"You want something to eat, do you?" asked the man, who was taking money behind a small counter.

"Yes, sir."

"Are you willing to work for it?"

"I am."

"Well, I am short-handed and can give you a job washing dishes."

"I'll take it," said Will, eagerly.

The proprietor called up a waiter and told him to take the boy into the kitchen and turn him over to the cook as a helper at the dish trough.

Will worked pretty steadily and satisfactorily for two hours and a half and was then given his supper and twenty-five cents.

One of the waiters took him to a cheap lodging-house where he put up himself, and Will spent fifteen cents for a bed.

Next morning after spending the remaining dime for a

cup of coffee and a plate of rolls, Will started out to hustle for work again.

He was not successful, and late in the afternoon found himself near the freight yards of a trunk railroad line.

He struck up an acquaintance with a boy who was also hanging around the yard, and they had quite a talk together.

"So you want to get to Mexico, do you?" grinned the boy.

"I do," replied Will.

"That's a long way off. It's a tough country, I've heard. Nobody lives there but Greasers."

"Who are Greasers?" asked Will, innocently.

"That's a kind of nickname for the Mexicans," replied his companion. "Some of them are a low-down set. I wouldn't go there if I was you."

"But I have a reason for wanting to go there," said Will.

"How are you going to get there without money?"

"I've been looking for work to make some ever since I landed here yesterday, but I haven't caught on to anything yet."

"Had anything to eat to-day?"

"Nothing but coffee and rolls this morning."

"Well, come over to the house with me. My mother will give you something to eat. Then maybe I can put you on to something that'll help you on your way."

Will, glad of a chance to get anything in the shape of food, accompanied his new acquaintance to his home, which was a small cottage hard by the yards.

The boy, whose father was employed in the freight yard, introduced Will to his mother and stated why he had brought him there.

She was a thoroughly hospitable Irish woman, and soon spread a substantial repast before the hungry boy.

After Will had eaten all he could, she put up a package of food for him at her son's request.

"Now we will go back to the yard," said Will's new companion.

They did so.

"The quickest way you can get out West, for you have to go West to reach Mexico, is by rail, and the cheapest way to go by rail is to beat your way," grinned the boy.

"Beat my way? What do you mean?"

"Don't you know what beating your way is?"

"No," replied Will, shaking his head.

"There are various ways of doing it. It's a favorite way of travel for tramps. It is rather unpleasant, and often rather dangerous; but I think I can fix you all right as far as Cincinnati, at any rate. You see that freight car yonder?"

"Yes."

"It's an empty belonging to the C. H. & D. road, and goes back to Cincinnati on that train they've been making up this afternoon. The train pulls out of the yard at seven to-night. That car door isn't locked. All you've got to do is to get into that car, close the door again, and

then you'll be as snug as you please till you want to get out again. I think mother put up enough stuff to last you as far as the car goes. At any rate, I hope it won't give out too soon. It all depends on your appetite. Don't eat too much at a time, but try to make it last."

"But I haven't any right to steal a ride on that car," objected Will.

"Don't you worry about that. The car has got to go back anyway. What's the difference if you go inside of it. Your weight won't hurt the rails any," he chuckled.

Will allowed himself to be persuaded, as he was very anxious to go West as soon as he could, so when the freight train pulled out of the yard at 7:10 our hero was dozing away in the corner of freight car No. 999, in the middle of the long line of cars.

CHAPTER XI.

STRANDED IN MEXICO.

It was a long and slow ride to Cincinnati on the freight, and though Will husbanded his food he finished the last mouthful nearly twenty-four hours before he reached the destination of car No. 999, consequently he was a famished boy when he finally left the freight yards of the C. H. & D. road.

He showed the effects of his long fast in his face, and in the shaky condition of his limbs; in fact, he soon felt so faint and sick that he had to sit down on the steps of a nearby house.

It was quite early in the morning, and a milkman going his rounds, noticing his appearance, stopped and asked him if he was sick.

"No, I'm not sick, but I'm half starved. I haven't had anything to eat or drink since yesterday morning, and not much to speak of then," replied Will, in a hollow voice.

"Well, you look it," answered the milkman.

He stepped back to his wagon and got a quart measure full of milk.

"Drink it down," he said, handing the can to Will, and then he passed around into the back yard of the house.

"I've a sandwich in the wagon I'll give you, too," he said, when he came back.

He brought it to Will.

"That ought to put new life in you for a while," he remarked.

The boy bit into it voraciously, finishing it in half a dozen bites.

"That tasted good, I can tell you," said Will, drawing a breath of relief. "I'm awfully obliged to you. I feel better already."

"Of course you do. I only wish I had something more to give you."

"You've done a lot for me as it is," replied Will, gratefully.

The milkman continued on his route, and Will, feeling like a new boy, though he was still hungry enough to get away with a pretty big meal, started to walk down into the business section of the big city.

He was fortunate enough to see a man in a commission house hanging out a sign marked "Boy Wanted," and he immediately applied for the position.

The fact that he was a stranger in the city almost spoiled his chances; but he put up such a strong plea that he was finally taken on trial.

He went about his new duties in such a bright and earnest way that he produced a favorable impression in the store.

There was only a dollar coming to him at the end of his first three days' services, as he had been compelled to draw something every day to support himself.

The merchant, however, appreciating his situation, advanced him half of his next week's wages of \$6, and that carried him through until the next pay-day.

After that it was plain sailing with him, and he began to save a little each week.

Although Will was extremely anxious to get to Mexico in order to find some trace of Jacob Luckstone, whom he was pretty confident had not perished in the Arlington Valley flood, still prudence told him not to sacrifice the position he had obtained until he had at least accumulated money enough to help out the great object of his life.

Therefore Will stuck to the commission house, doing his level best to please his employer.

In this he succeeded so well that in six months he was promoted to a better situation in the store, and his pay was raised to \$8 a week.

Four months later another vacancy occurring he received his second promotion, and a raise to \$10.

During the first six months he had not been able to save very much, as he had clothes and many other things to buy, which made a hole in his small surplus; but with his first raise he began to do very much better, and now, when he was advanced to \$10 his savings commenced to assume a very satisfactory appearance in his bankbook.

He was getting on very nicely, with the prospects of a further promotion in the house, when, through a heavy embezzlement on the part of the cashier, Will's employer failed, and he was thrown out of work.

With \$230 in his pocket Will decided he would no longer delay his long-contemplated trip to Mexico.

It is true he realized that he was bound on something of a wild-goose chase, as he had only a vague notion of the mountainous district where he hoped to find Jacob Luckstone; but he had plenty of energy and courage, backed by an inward conviction that he would surely succeed in the end.

Therefore, it was without the slightest misgivings that he purchased a ticket to El Paso, and boarded a Santa Fe train for the southwest.

When Will arrived at the Mexican border town he found

that it was a long, rambling sort of settlement, extending along a fertile and narrow valley upon the Rio Grande River.

The population was of a nondescript character, principally Mexicans of the ordinary type, and Americans of the rough-and-ready variety.

Will put up at a two-story wooden edifice called the Rio Grande Hotel.

He began making inquiries about Jacob Luckstone, whom he described according to his recollections of a year or so previous.

Nobody seemed to have known such a man, though the boy made a pretty thorough canvass of the settlement during the week he remained there.

This was rather a discouraging beginning of his Mexican anticipations.

But worse was to come.

A tough specimen of a Texan accosted him one day as he was coming out of the hotel.

"I heard you were asking for a man named Luckstone," he said, in a friendly way.

"Yes," said Will eagerly. "Jacob Luckstone. He must have passed through this town a year or more ago, and probably hung around a day or so waiting for a train bound east."

"What sort of looking man was he?" asked the Texan. Will described Luckstone.

"I was talking to just such a man three months ago. His name was Luckstone, too. Came here for supplies from a place called——"

The Texan paused, and appeared to be trying to recall the name of the place.

"Was it in the mountains?"

The man noticed the eagerness with which the boy asked the question.

"Sure it was," he grinned. "Up in a spur of the Sierra Madre range."

"How far from here?" inquired Will.

"Well, now you've got me. I remember he took the Mexican Central to Carmen, that's about 150 miles south of this place, and is the nearest town on the railroad to the range."

"How far are the mountains from Carmen?"

"A hundred miles, I guess. Carmen is the place for you to go. If you'll stand the expense I'll go there with you. I'm well acquainted in that town, and I'll bet I'll be able to locate your man."

"All right," agreed Will, with alacrity.

A train was scheduled to leave for the City of Mexico at three that afternoon, and when it pulled out of the depot Will Melville and his new acquaintance, who said his name was Bart Bradley, were aboard.

A run of something over four hours landed them at Carmen.

It was dark when they got there, and Will permitted Bradley to pilot him to a one-story adobe building on the

suburbs where he said he was acquainted, and where they could put up for the night.

Although Will was not particularly tired when they sat down by themselves to a dirty table, in an ill-kept and ill-lighted room, to partake of a meal served by a villainous-looking peon, yet the boy had hardly finished his coffee before he began to experience a drowsy feeling that he found impossible to shake off.

His next recollection was waking up on a bed, in a small, filthy, whitewashed room, the smell of which suggested anything but the odor of roses, with the morning sun shining through a windowless hole on his face.

He immediately became conscious of two things—that he had a splitting headache, and that he was fully dressed.

"How came I here in this shape?" he muttered, in a perplexed way. "One would think I was drunk last night, and that Bradley brought me to this room and left me, just as I was, to sleep it off."

As Will had never touched a glass of intoxicating drink in his life he knew there must be some other cause for his present condition.

What could that cause be?

"The last thing I remember is sitting at the supper-table with Bart Bradley. I must hunt him up and see what was the matter with me."

Getting up, he soused his head in a bowl of water, which kind of brightened him up a bit.

Then he made his way around to the front of the building, where he saw a man in a sombrero and a soiled suit of clothes sitting in the sun lazily smoking a cigarette.

Judging that he belonged to the house, Will asked him as to the present whereabouts of Bart Bradley.

The man regarded him with a curious stare, and then shook his head.

Either he couldn't speak English, or was unable to give the desired information.

Will then entered the house and passed through several rooms before he came to another person, who happened to be the hard-looking peon who had waited on them the night before.

Will obtained no better results from him.

He now recollected that Bradley had spoken to the people of the house in Spanish, so he began to have grave doubts if he would be able to make himself understood.

After helping himself to a drink of water, Will motioned to the peon an intimation that he would like something to eat.

The man nodded, and uttered the English word "money" plain enough.

Will thrust his hand into his pocket, where he supposed he had a handful of the current coin of the country, and was surprised to discover that his pocket was empty.

He tried his other pockets in succession, while the Mexican watched his futile efforts to produce the needful.

"Good gracious!" the boy exclaimed at last, with a blank look on his face, "what has become of my money? Why, I haven't a cent about me."

A sardonic grin came over the peon's features.

Will noticed it, and like a flash the truth dawned across his mind.

He had been robbed the night before.

CHAPTER XII.

WILL GOES TO WORK FOR THE MEXICAN CENTRAL RAILWAY.

"This is the toughest deal I've been up against yet," breathed Will, feeling as discouraged as a boy could feel. "I must find Bart Bradley and tell him what has happened to me."

But he didn't find Bart Bradley anywhere about.

He hung around the neighborhood for a couple of hours, but his new acquaintance didn't turn up.

Then at last he began to suspect that he had been the victim of a put-up job from the first.

"What a fool I was to trust such a man as Bradley, anyway!" he ejaculated disconsolately. "The savings of sixteen months gone in a moment. What am I to do now? In a strange country, where I don't even understand the language, and not a single penny in my clothes. This is certainly the limit. Little chance now of finding Jacob Luckstone, and unless I can locate him I shall never be able to meet my missing father."

Will started for the main part of the town, hoping to run across somebody who understood English, to whom he could explain his plight, and ask for temporary help.

The railroad track seemed to offer the shortest cut, so he started along the ties.

He had only proceeded a short distance before he saw a familiar sight to American eyes—a bunch of section-hands working on the roadbed.

They were all natives of the country, however, except one man who appeared to be the foreman.

To Will's great delight this individual looked like an Irishman, though he addressed the gang in Spanish.

It was not very good Spanish, it is true, but the men understood him, and Will certainly didn't know the difference.

As the boy came up the foreman looked at him curiously.

"You speak English, don't you?" asked Will, halting in front of him.

"Faith, I do whin it's not Spanish I'm wrestlin' wid. It's an American yez are, I kin see wid half an eye. What kin I be afther doin' fer yez?"

"Well," said the boy, encouraged by the friendly attitude of the man, "I'm in a bad hole."

"A bad hole, is it?" replied the foreman, with a look of interest. "How's that?"

Will gave him an outline of his object in coming to Mexico, and then explained how he had run across Bart Bradley in El Paso; how that individual had induced him to

come to Carmen on the previous evening's train, and what had happened to him since he arrived in the town.

The Irishman listened to him with a great deal of attention, and when the boy had finished his story said:

"Sure, it's as plain as the nose on yer face thot thot rascal worked yez for yer money."

"I'm afraid he did," acknowledged Will, ruefully.

"Of course he did. He took yez to one of the worst places in the neighborhood, dosed yer coffee, an' thin wint through yer clothes at his leisure. An' are yez dead broke now?" in a sympathetic tone.

"I haven't a cent, and don't know where I'll get one. I am in a fair way to starve unless something turns up."

"Don't worry about starvin', me boy. It's mesilf'll see thot yez'll get somethin' to ate, so I will. Here, take this. It'll provide yez wid a breakfast," and he handed Will a small Mexican silver coin. Yez'll foind an atin' house beyant the station. Go an' fill up, then come back this way an' we'll talk it over, an' maybe I'll be able to help yez a bit."

"Thank you," replied Will, gratefully. "What is your name?"

"Me name, is it? Mike Doyle. An' what's yours?"

"Will Melville."

"Where do yez hail from?"

"Maywood, West Virginia."

"Well, run along now, an' don't forget to come back. Yez'll find us not a great way from here up the line."

Will hurried down the road till he came to the station.

He had no difficulty in finding the eating-house, which was run by the railroad company, nor in making his wants understood, for the waiters spoke English.

Within an hour he was back again at the new spot where the section hands were at work.

The men had their crowbars under the ties some distance ahead, and Mike Doyle was bending down taking a sight along the rail to make sure that the track was quite level.

He motioned to the gang, whose heads were turned toward him, and they began to heave again at their bars, growing red in the face under the strain.

Presently he made another motion with one of his arms.

Some of the men braced themselves and held on to their bars, while others hastened to tamp some gravel solidly under the ties to keep them in place.

Doyle, at leisure for a moment, turned around and noticed Will standing a few feet away.

"It's back yez are, I see," he said, pleasantly. "I've been considerin' yer case, Melville. Are yez able to do a little hard worruk?"

"I'm as strong as any boy my size, and perhaps stronger than most, for I worked two years on a farm before I came West. I'm ready to tackle any kind of labor in sight, and will be glad of the chance to get it. When a fellow is on his uppers he has either to hustle or go to the wall."

"Thot's right, especially whin he's in a country where he can't spake the language. Well," continued the fore-

man, inspecting Will's muscular and well-built form with much satisfaction, "I'm a man short, and if yez are willin' to tackle the job, which ain't no sinecure, I can tell yez, and the pay is low, but thin it don't cost much to live in Greaser-land, why, I'll put yez to work. If yez don't fancy the job yez kin throw it up to-night."

"I'll accept your offer, Mr. Doyle," said Will, eagerly.

"Good; but don't Mr. Doyle me, if yez please. Me name is Mike, an' thot's whot yez want to call me, do yez mind?"

"Yes, sir."

"Yes, Mike, yez mane. Now, put yer jacket on the hand-car over there, get a pick an' shovel, and I'll tache yez the ropes."

Will was back in a moment with the tools.

Mike Doyle took the boy over to the group of Mexicans.

"Now watch me, and it's a good section-hand I'll soon be afther makin' of yez."

The work of straightening the track began again, and soon the lad was hard at it with the others.

He soon discovered what tough work it was.

To raise the rigid track the fraction of an inch required the straining of every muscle in his body to the cracking point.

To replace a tie was a task that tried every nerve and sinew.

The almost tropical sun beat down relentlessly on the boy's head, bringing out the perspiration in streams.

But Will kept at it bravely, determined that no Mexican should outdo him.

Doyle nodded approvingly as he noted the boy's efforts, and occasionally spoke a word of encouragement to him.

"Don't thry to do too much, me lad," he said, with a grin. "Let these Greasers do their share. They're lazy enough at the best, Heaven knows. It's a hard job to get the worruk out of them, anyway."

After awhile Doyle took out his watch, held it for a few minutes in his hand, and then gave the word to knock off for dinner.

In spite of his zeal Will was glad enough to take a rest.

All hands went in a body to the hand-car where their dinner-pails were, and then the Mexicans sat down in the shady side of it, and commenced to eat.

Doyle took Will with him over to a nearby tree, and under its protecting branches they squatted down together.

"I've enough for two here an' to spare," said the foreman, removing the top from his American-made dinner-pail. "First of all, take that tin pail ye see on the car and go down the road a bit till yez come to a crik. Fetch it back full, for it's nothin' stronger than that we'll get to drink hereabouts."

Mike Doyle spoke truly when he said he had plenty of provisions in his pail.

The railroad eating-house where he boarded supplied his wants in that direction bountifully.

Will ate all he wanted, drank half of the water in the

pail, and then lay back against the tree perfectly satisfied. Doyle lit his pipe and began to smoke.

Between puffs he told Will something about the Mexican Southern Railway, and how he happened to come down into Mexico to work.

Will also told him about his hopes of meeting his father some day, provided he was so fortunate as to run across Jacob Luckstone, who held the key to the situation.

"Ye think this Luckstone is somewhere in the mountains, do yez?" said Doyle.

"Yes."

"The Sierra Madre is the nearest range to this spot—about 100 miles or so due west—but it's a mighty long range, do yez moind. Unless yez knew just where to hunt for yer man it'd be like lookin' for a needle in a hay-stack, so it would."

"Luckstone said that he and my father were at some place in the mountains within about 100 miles of the Texas border."

"Well, thot's better; but still bad enough. It's no aisy thing worrukin' yer way through thim ravines an' gorges, an' sich loike. I'm afeard yer worruk is cut out for yez."

"I'm afraid it is, too," acknowledged Will, rather sorrowfully.

At one o'clock work was resumed on the roadbed until two.

Then it was discontinued until four, when it was taken up again until dark.

Several trains passed in either direction that afternoon, and Will viewed them with considerable interest.

When the order came to knock off for the day the hand-car was put on the rails, the tools piled upon it, and all hands getting aboard two of the Mexicans seized the levers, and in a moment the car was spinning down the track toward Carmen.

CHAPTER XIII.

AT LAST.

Mike Doyle decided to take Will to room with him, and he made arrangements at the eating-house for the boy to board there.

Will was very grateful to Doyle for the interest he took in him and told him so.

"Don't say a worrud, me lad. Sure, I couldn't do less for a fine American boy like ye are, stranded in a haythen country loike this. Just hould yer whist, an' take whatever comes yer way."

In a week Will had mastered the fine points of section work so well that Doyle made him his chief assistant.

In this manner three months passed away.

One afternoon Doyle came to Will and told him the division superintendent wanted to see him in his office on the following morning.

"Why, what does he want to see me for?" the boy asked, in surprise.

"Faith, it isn't for me to say, but it's my opinion he's got a better job for yez than whot yez are doin'," replied the foreman.

"I don't see how he came to know anything about me," said Will. "Besides, what else can I do?"

"Well, yez moight make a good foreman, loike meself, for instance, over a gang of these Greasers."

"Then it must be that you've recommended me for such a position," said Will.

"P'raps I have—who knows? But don't say anythin' till ye see the super."

Will reported at the superintendent's office next morning.

"You're younger than I thought you were," remarked that official, when he had sized the boy up. "How long have you been on the road?"

"Three months, sir," replied Will, respectfully.

"What road did you work on before you came to Mexico?"

"I never worked on a railroad before, sir."

"Never worked as a section-hand before you came here, and you've only been three months in our employ, yet Doyle has recommended you as a thoroughly competent man for the foremanship of a gang."

The superintendent knitted his brows and looked hard at Will.

"Do you think you're able to fill the bill?" he added, after a pause.

"Yes, sir," replied the boy, promptly.

The official, who once upon a time had been a section foreman himself on the Chicago & Alton road in Illinois, began to ask Will a number of questions about the duties of the position, all of which he answered to the superintendent's satisfaction.

The result was that the boy was appointed on trial.

He was sent to the section below Carmen, and had no great difficulty in making good.

Although it was a source of great pleasure to him to know that he was giving satisfaction to the company that employed him, he never forgot for a moment the object which had brought him into the country.

Often he would gaze in the direction of the great Sierra Madre range, and wonder if his father was still alive, and if so in what part of those mountains he and Jacob Luckstone were located.

It did not seem to occur to him that circumstances might have taken them elsewhere during the interval of nearly two years which had now elapsed since the flood at Maywood.

Will met Doyle every night after the day's work was over, and Mike proved to be a stanch friend and a cheerful companion.

Thus six months more passed away, and Will was approaching his eighteenth year.

One evening Will and Mike Doyle attended a Mexican

celebration at a big hacienda a few miles out of town. There were six or seven hundred people connected with the hacienda in one capacity or another, and consequently what with the visitors who had been invited to take part in the festivities there were all of a thousand persons on the spacious grounds after nightfall.

The long, rambling two-story building, said to be three hundred years old, was gayly decorated and lighted up, while fancy lanterns strung from the trees made the grounds nearly as light as day.

There was music and dancing and fun galore, especially for the young people, who enjoyed themselves as only young persons can do.

A pretty senorita had managed to capture Will, and he was airing his imperfect Spanish on her, greatly to her amusement.

She on her part was flirting most desperately with him, and trying her best to make him understand her language.

They were sitting in a shady nook not far from the house, with a wide open space directly before them filled with promenaders, when suddenly the boy's attention was attracted to a well-dressed man who was making his way through the crowd, as if he was taking his departure from the place.

There was something strangely familiar about this person's figure and side face that set Will's heart to beating quickly, and he tried to get a better look at him, much to the senorita's vexation, for she imagined Will was interested in some rival beauty.

As the stranger reached the edge of the trees his face, which at that moment he turned in Will's direction, came into the full glow of a cluster of lanterns.

The boy started up suddenly as though he had received an unexpected electric shock, for the face he saw was surely the countenance of Jacob Luckstone.

He was sure he could not be mistaken.

With a little gasp of excitement Will was on the point of dashing forward for the purpose of intercepting him, when the Mexican maiden by his side grasped him by the arm and detained him.

Will was too much of a young gentleman to shake her off rudely, and he turned to try and explain matters to her.

But between his excitement and his bad Spanish he made a mess of it.

When he finally got the girl to understand that he would return in a moment or two, Luckstone, if it was indeed he, had disappeared.

Will, however, darted off in the direction the man had taken, believing he could easily come up with him.

He did not succeed in doing so, or even getting another sight of him.

The man had taken one of the numerous by-paths out of the grounds, and so to the boy's intense chagrin he lost him altogether.

Will finally returned to the senorita, whom he found waiting for him, but the girl was much provoked to find

that a change had come over his spirits, and that his subsequent gaiety was largely forced.

Later on Will met Mike Doyle, and told him about the incident.

"Are yez sure it was the man yez have been wantin' to see so bad?"

"I'm as sure as I can be considering that it's two years since I met him at Maywood, and then lost him in the storm and flood."

"It's too bad yez didn't succeed in catchin' him, so it is."

"I'm awfully disappointed. I may never get such a chance again. What do you think I'd better do?"

"Well, me b'y, the fact that he was here on these grounds shows that he ought to be known to Senor Martinez, or some member of his family. The best thing yez could do is to make inquiries about him. Ask the Don if he knows Luckstone, and if he does the rest ought to be aisy, for he can probably be able to put yez on his track."

"I'll do it," cried Will, in eager excitement, and he started off at once to hunt up the proprietor of the hacienda.

He found Senor Martinez surrounded by a group of friends, and he took the first chance to ask for a few minutes' private conversation with him.

The Don could converse very fluently in English, and this was of great advantage to Will, who would have had some difficulty in expressing in Spanish all he wanted to say.

"Will you tell me, Senor Martinez, if you are acquainted with a man named Jacob Luckstone?"

"Yes. Senor Luckstone and myself are very well acquainted. He was here all the afternoon; in fact, up to a short time ago, when he left to return to his mines in the Sierra Madre."

"You can tell me where those mines are situated, Senor Martinez, can you not?" cried Will, his eyes blazing with suppressed excitement.

"Why, yes. I have visited them. They are not as yet very productive, but still the prospects are quite bright, especially of late, as Senor Luckstone told me this afternoon. Are you thinking of going there?"

"Yes, yes."

"Then you must go by way of San Jose. That is sixty miles from here to the northwest. There is a good road all the way to Los Saucillos, an ancient village in the foothills, sixty-five miles west of San Jose. The region all about there was full of silver in the days of the Spanish possession. At Los Saucillos they will point out the road you are to take up into the range. It leads direct through a wild section of ravines and gorges to a dark hole in the mountain. This is the entrance to one of the principal silver deposits in the time of Cortez, known as La Veta Negra, or the Black Vein. It was exhausted more than a century ago; neither gold nor silver is found there now. A mile beyond La Veta Negra are the mines of Senors Luckstone and Melville."

"Who did you say?" cried Will, seizing Signor Martinez by the arm. "Melville?"

"Yes," replied the Mexican, surprised at the boy's emotion. "Do you know him?"

"Know him? I should think I did! He is my father."

CHAPTER XIV.

THE BLACK VEIN.

Will Melville was a happy boy that night when, in company with Mike Doyle, he returned to their lodgings at Carmen.

He knew that his dear father was alive and well, and that only a trifle over a hundred miles separated them.

He possessed full directions for reaching the Sierra Madre mines, owned and being worked by Jacob Luckstone and his father in partnership.

A stout Mexican horse, which Senor Martinez had promised to lend him, would take him there in about two days, and then—he could hardly bear to think of the great joy and satisfaction that would be his to see and speak to his father once more—the father he had for so many years thought to be dead.

"But do you think your father will know yez?" asked Doyle, regarding the boy curiously.

"Know me! Why should he not?"

"Well, ye see, in the first place yez was a mighty small b'y whin he went away to Cripple Creek. Thin ye remember yez tould me that this Jacob Luckstone said that yer father had lost all thrack of the past."

"That's true," replied Will, his countenance dropping. "If he doesn't know me what shall I do?" and the tears came into the lad's eyes.

"There now, don't yez be downhearted. P'haps the soight of ye will bring back his ould reminbrance. At any rate, yez say Luckstone is friendly toward ye, and promised to do the square thing by ye. Bechune the pair of yez a way may be found to bring things roight."

"I hope so. I do hope so," said Will, fervently.

"The first thing yez must do is to get lave of absince from the super. Sind yer request the first thing in the mornin' wid yer r'asons for wantin' to get off. He'll fix it for yez all roight whin he understands the case."

"I will," replied Will.

"That's roight, an' may good luck attind yez, me b'y."

On the following afternoon Will received leave of absence for a week, and next morning early he started for the Martinez hacienda.

Senor Martinez was expecting him, and had the promised horse ready.

"I have a message to send to Senor Luckstone," he said. "Therefore I will let one of my people accompany you. That will save you the trouble of inquiring your way, for

he will take you direct to the Sierra Madre mines, as he is acquainted with every foot of the way."

Will said that would suit him immensely.

Senor Martinez sent for the man, whose name was Pedro, and introduced him to Will.

"You shall breakfast with us before you start on your journey," said the senor with true Mexican hospitality.

Although the boy had eaten before he left Carmen, he was easily persuaded to sit down with the family to a second breakfast, which was not over until eleven o'clock.

Fifteen minutes later he and Pedro set off on horseback for the distant Sierra Madre range.

That evening they stopped at another hacienda, where they were hospitably received, as coming from Senor Martinez.

At ten o'clock next morning they rode into San Jose.

They stopped only long enough to partake of some refreshments, and then resumed their journey in the direction of the village of Los Saucillos.

Pedro spoke English well enough for Will to understand all he said, and as he was a talkative old fellow, he kept the boy's ears well employed listening to his stories, many of them weird tales of the mountains they were approaching.

They put up for the night at a roadside house, with the people of which Pedro was well acquainted.

After a light breakfast they started on again, reaching Los Saucillos early in the forenoon.

They made no stop at this place, except to water the horses and take a light luncheon of fruit.

From that point the balance of their journey would be more or less uphill.

As they left the village behind them, Will noticed that the sky looked somewhat peculiar, and he called his companion's attention to it.

Pedro said it might mean a storm or it might not; at any rate, he guessed they would reach their destination some time before any such thing happened.

The horses were allowed to take their own time, as they ascended the lower reaches of the range.

For some time they had a splendid bird's-eye view of the plain below, stretching far away toward the railway, 135 miles distant, then as they penetrated the fastnesses of the mountains the view became contracted and wild in the extreme.

A succession of ravines and gorges now confronted them, and the bridle path, worn smooth centuries before by the silver-laden mules of the aborigines, was their only guide to the region they were aiming for.

As they mounted slowly upward, winding around the foot of some lofty precipice, and anon traversing the almost inaccessible heights of a narrow pathway cut out of the mountain side ages before by the Indians, with only small patches of the hazy-looking sky above them, Will was overpowered by the wild grandeur of the scene so new and strange to his young eyes.

It was in the midst of a deep wooded gorge that they be-

gan to notice the darkening of the sky, and heard strange sounds in the air from afar.

"We must hasten," said Pedro, to whom such tokens of a mountain storm were quite familiar. "We will have no more than time to reach the Sierra Madre mines before it will be upon us."

"It would be rather dangerous to be caught here in a storm, wouldn't it, Pedro?"

"Dangerous!" replied the Mexican. "Ah, yes; it would be as much as our lives were worth."

For a long time they had been proceeding in single file, Pedro in advance, the path being only wide enough to accommodate one animal at a time.

In this manner they approached the neighborhood of the old disused La Veta Negra silver mine.

The entrance was nothing but a great hole in the side of one of the mountains of the range, whose peak rose to a great height.

Pedro pointed it out to Will on the other side of a small canyon they were circling.

The sky grew darker and more threatening as they proceeded.

The air at present was almost preternaturally still; but it was only the calm which preceded the war of the elements soon to burst over their heads.

Far away brilliant flashes of light lit up the opaque clouds, and the grumbling of the thunder sounded more menacing than Will ever remembered to have heard it before.

In spite of Pedro's anxiety to drive ahead, the growing darkness and precarious nature of their path around the canyon, yawning hundreds of feet below, prevented the animals from proceeding at a greater speed than a sharp jog trot.

They could see the storm rushing down upon them at a terrific pace.

"We'll never be able to reach the mines before it's upon us," said Will, glancing fearfully over his shoulder, as they drew near to the wide shelf in front of the opening to the La Veta Negra.

He hurled these words at Pedro, who was crouching low over his horse's head.

The Mexican did not seem to have heard him, though the air in the canyon was yet quiet, at any rate he made no sign that he did.

The animals seemed as sensitive as their riders of the approaching convulsion of nature, for they shivered perceptibly, and otherwise acted in a frightened way.

The scene was terribly weird to Will, who had never met with anything at all like it before.

The stillness of the canyon, the semi-twilight in the air, at two in the afternoon; the black masses of electrically charged clouds, massed in most unearthly-looking shapes; the heavy rumbling thunder, and, most disquieting of all, the roar of the wind which had not yet reached them.

It was as if some huge monster from the other world was rushing down upon them, breathing fire from his

eyes and suppressed rage from his mouth, while he lashed the air with his gigantic wings.

The suspense was nerve-racking, but it was soon over.

Hardly had they reached the plateau and Pedro, with a hoarse, unintelligible shout to Will, headed his animal for the hole in the mountain side, than the storm swooped upon them with a fierceness that left no doubt in the boy's mind that had they been caught anywhere along the face of the canyon wall their fate could easily have been foreseen.

"Ave Maria!" ejaculated Pedro, as they dismounted just inside of the entrance to the La Veta Negra, "what an escape!"

The rain descended in torrents, and was blown so far into the cavernous opening that Pedro and the boy had to retire some distance into the black depths of the mountain.

Pedro, like the majority of his class, was extremely superstitious.

He had heard in his infancy that the famous La Veta Negra was peopled with gnomes and wicked spirits of all kinds, ruled over by a demon called "Mina-padre," and consequently he had always given it a wide berth whenever he came into that part of the range.

Now that he and Will had been forced to enter it to save their lives, his fears of the place came upon him with a fresh and overpowering force, and he crouched down against the wall of rock, looking fearfully about him as the red glow of the lightning without lit up the interior of the mine in a weird and startling manner.

Will was bothered by no such feeling.

The mine was like any other opening into the ground to him, except that his curiosity to explore the depths of this famous one-time silver lode, untouched and presumed to have petered out ages ago, was considerable.

As the moments went by and the storm without continued as terrible as ever, the boy found their enforced idleness very monotonous.

Rolling a bunch of paper he had with him into the shape of a torch, he started to examine the mine as far as he could go.

He proceeded further and further into the depths of the mine, which slanted downward at an angle of forty-five degrees, but nothing save the bare rock greeted his eye—not a trace could he see of the course of the wonderful black vein which two centuries or more ago had made this mine one of the most famous of Mexico.

"I must go back," he said to himself, as his torch showed that it could last only a little while longer. "The black vein is evidently a thing of the past."

Hardly were the words out of his mouth before a terrible crash sounded above, and tons of splintered rock rained around him and fell away from one side of the mine.

At the same time the whole interior was lighted up with a most unearthly glow, while the mountain shook as if in the throes of an earthquake.

It was all over in a moment, but the shock had stretched Will unconscious upon the mass of debris, and there he

lay, silent and motionless, long after the storm had passed away, and while Pedro, stricken with a terrible fear, was urging his own horse and the riderless one toward the Sierra Madre mines, a mile and a quarter away.

CHAPTER XV.

TO THE RESCUE.

Will Melville lay for many hours insensible in the impenetrable darkness of the La Veta Negra mine, surrounded by the shattered fragments of tons of rock.

At last his consciousness returned.

Naturally the first question that presented itself to his mind was where was he?

In a moment or two recollection reasserted itself, and his experiences up to the moment he had been struck down passed across his mental vision as clear as sunlight.

"I suppose it was a thunderbolt which penetrated the mountain. Nothing else could have raised such a glare and rumpus down here. I wonder how long I have been unconscious? Not long, I guess, or Pedro surely would have come down here looking for me. The worst of the storm seems to be over, for I don't hear a sound of it down here any more. Now the question is which direction shall I take to get out of here. I mustn't by mistake go deeper into the mine. I remember now the mine slopes downward, so all I have to do is to walk upward."

Will struck a match to get an idea of his surroundings.

Its momentary glare gave him a brief glimpse of the ruin which had been wrought by the thunderbolt.

He saw the blackened edges of his paper torch peeping from under a mass of debris.

That reminded him that he had the other half of the paper still in his pocket, so he took it out, twisted it tightly, and lit it.

As he swung the improvised torch aloft he noticed the glittering character of certain portions of the rock which had been dislodged from the side of the mine.

Examining them more closely, he saw they were streaked with thick veins of a silvery hue.

He looked up at the shattered wall, and it seemed to be fairly alive with the same whitish streaks standing out in a dark-colored rock.

"My gracious!" Will exclaimed in some excitement. "Can this be silver ore? Is it possible that the thunderbolt opened up a new lode in the black vein? If so, then I have made a wonderful discovery in this old deserted mine. If it is silver isn't it mine by right of finding? I'll take a few specimens of this stuff with me. Mr. Luckstone is an expert and will be able to tell at a glance if this is the real thing or not. It will be a great thing for me if it is silver."

Will filled both of his pockets with the best of the small specimens he could see, and then turned his attention to the task of getting out into the air again.

He followed the upward slant of the hole, and soon turned into the main corridor which gave him a view of the entrance to the mine.

He had no further use for his torch and trampled it under his feet.

As he approached the front of the mine he was surprised to see no sign of Pedro or the horses either.

"They are probably outside on the plateau, for the storm seems to be quite over," he said to himself. "Now I remember Pedro was greatly disturbed by his fancies of spirits, and such nonsense being in the mine, so I s'pose he got out into the open at the first chance."

When Will reached the mouth of the entrance, whence he could see the whole of the plateau, he was much surprised because there was no sign of Pedro or the horses.

"Why, where could he have gone? Surely he would not desert me in the midst of the mountains."

But though the boy looked sharply on every side, he found not the slightest evidence that his late companion was anywhere in the vicinity.

"Well, this is tough. I really don't know what I had better do. From the looks of the sky I should say it was much later in the afternoon than I had any idea of. If I only carried a watch I should be able to tell the time of day it is. I must have been longer down in the mine than I supposed. Pedro, of course, heard the crash of the thunderbolt, and not seeing me return within a reasonable time he jumped to the conclusion that I was overwhelmed by the concussion, and not having the courage to venture after me to investigate, he has probably carried the story of my supposed death to Mr. Luckstone. I guess that must be it, for it would account for his disappearance with the horses."

Will had made a pretty close guess at the truth.

At that very moment Pedro was telling his story to Luckstone and half a dozen other interested auditors, the gist of which was that the American boy who had accompanied him on his trip up into the range, and taken shelter with him from the storm in the old La Veta Negra mine, had recklessly ventured to explore the mine, and had been carried off by the spirits who guarded the place.

"What was his name?"

"His name? Ah, yes, I remember now, it was Melville."

"My heavens!" Luckstone exclaimed, in some excitement. "Could it have been my partner's son, whom I've never been able to get the slightest trace of since we were forcibly separated that morning in the flooded Arlington Valley?"

He made Pedro go all over his story again.

"Why didn't you go down into the mine and hunt him up when he failed to return? Why did you desert him?"

"Go down into La Veta Negra, señor!" cried Pedro, in a tone of consternation, at the same time hastily crossing himself. "I would not do that for all the silver in these mountains."

With a snort of disgust and contempt Luckstone turned to the other listeners.

"Boys," he said, "that young fellow whom I suspect to be the son of my partner, George Melville, and of whose

whereabouts I have tried in vain for the past two years to get some trace of, may have been caught by a cave-in down in the Black Vein. It does not follow that he was killed or even seriously injured, yet at the same time he may be held a prisoner behind a mass of dislodged rocks in the dark. We must go at once to the old mine and make a thorough search for him. We owe it as a duty to Mr. Melville, who has not seen his son in ten years."

"Aye, aye, Mr. Luckstone. We're with you," cried the others enthusiastically.

In fifteen minutes a rescue party was all ready to start for the Black Vein mine.

"Not a word of this to Mr. Melville, mind, until we return," said Luckstone, warningly, to Pedro and the others who were not of the party. "If luck is against us I will break the news to him myself—d'ye understand?"

They nodded assent, then Luckstone gave the order to start, and with himself in the lead they filed off down the mountain path toward La Veta Negra.

CHAPTER XVI.

CONCLUSION.

Will Melville, satisfied that Pedro had gone on to the Sierra Madre mines after the storm had blown itself over, decided to follow the trail or path on foot.

"He had proceeded perhaps three-quarters of a mile when he heard the sound of horses' hoofs approaching.

Will seated himself on a rock and waited for the party to come up.

In five minutes the horsemen came into view, riding quite smartly down the ravine.

As they came close upon him the boy recognized the man who rode in advance.

It was Jacob Luckstone.

Will rushed up and grasped the bridle of his horse.

"Mr. Luckstone," he exclaimed eagerly, "don't you know me?"

"Will Melville, by all that's lucky!" cried Luckstone, slipping out of his saddle and grasping the lad by the hand.

"Yes, sir; I'm Will Melville all right. I've come to meet my father."

"You shall see him right away. Why, we were on the way to the Black Vein mine to look for you. Pedro, under whose guidance you came into the mountains, turned up at the Sierra Madre half an hour ago with the story that you had been lost in the depths of the Black Vein during this afternoon's storm. The superstitious old chap insisted that the Mina-padre had got hold of you."

"It doesn't look as if he had, does it?" laughed Will.

"Well, hardly," chuckled Luckstone. "I never was so glad to see anyone in my life as I am to meet you, my lad, and right here, too."

"Same here," replied Will. "I've been on a still hunt after you for two years. But it was like looking for a needle in a haystack."

"And we—your father and I—have been searching the States for a trace of you, too. The Pinkertons have had the case in hand for nearly a year—in fact, ever since your father recovered his right senses."

"What!" cried the boy joyfully, "is father all right again?"

"He is—as good as he ever was."

"Hurrah!" exclaimed Will, feeling like standing on his head through sheer delight.

"Start back, boys," said Luckstone, waving the men to their horses. "The boy and I will follow on foot. Where the dickens did you disappear to after the boat carried me away that morning?" continued the man, turning again to Will.

"I was going to ask you the same question," replied the boy.

"Oh, I was driven ashore about five miles down the valley. From there I made my way along the foothills above the flood line to Maywood. I put up at the hotel and waited till the storm blew over, which it did about noon. Then I started out to hunt you up, but not a trace could I find of you. I waited around Maywood for a week, by which time the flood had greatly subsided. A fierce lot of damage had been done by the water, I can tell you. I had almost come to the conclusion that you had been drowned when I saw a paragraph in the local paper which stated that a boy, who gave his name as Will Melville, and said he lived near Maywood, had been picked off a floating shed by a sloop, way down the Maple river near Carrolton, and landed at Reedsburg. I hustled to that town, but could find no trace of you. Then I came back to Maywood and called on Amos Skinner. I accused him of trying to burn me up in the old barn. He denied it. I said I had a witness, however, and would produce him unless he came up with double the amount I had assessed him for that evening when I made my first call. The bluff worked, in connection with the hold I already had on him, and he gave me \$5,000. With this in my pocket I came back here and purchased the Sierra Madre mines for the joint account of your father and myself. It wasn't long after that when your father recovered his memory. He was astonished to find himself in Mexico. I let him have the whole story of Skinner's crookedness, his wife's death, and your disappearance. It broke him all up, I can tell you. After a time he insisted he must return to the States, and see if he could get any trace of you. He went to Maywood and presented himself before the panic-stricken Skinner. What occurred between them I'll leave for him to tell you by and by. At any rate, he made Skinner stump up his \$20,000 with full interest, without any deductions for what I had squeezed him out of. That left the old rascal pretty flat. Then your father consulted the Pinkerton Detective Agency, and offered them a reward of \$5,000 to find you, which they are still trying to earn. Having nothing more to do he came back here, and has been here ever since, hopefully expectant that he would get word about you at any moment.

That's about all I can tell you in a rough way. Now, my lad, let me have your story."

Will was glad to tell Luckstone of his adventures and endeavors to get ahead since that fateful morning when the flood parted them in the Arlington Valley, and had barely concluded his narrative when the party reached the Sierra Madre mines.

The reunion of father and son was very touching, and the reader may well believe they had lots to say to each other.

It was not till Will retired that night that his thoughts recurred to the silver-streaked stones he had in his pocket.

The first thing he did next morning was to show them to his father.

"Why, where did you pick up these specimens?" asked Mr. Melville, in some excitement. "It is purer silver ore than anything we have taken from the Sierra Madre so far."

Will told him.

Luckstone was summoned to a consultation at once.

When he heard the boy's story he became greatly excited, too.

Horses were brought out, and the party of three visited the La Veta Negra.

They had provided themselves with lanterns and sundry small tools for inspecting the vein of silver they expected to find.

Will's accidental discovery of silver ore in the Black Vein proved to be of the greatest value.

Before it was made publicly known George Melville obtained possession in his own name from the Mexican government of the La Veta Negra.

When everything had been satisfactorily arranged a force of peons were put to work in the mine, and the ore that soon came to light astonished the country.

All the profit, of course, went to Will, and to-day he is one of the richest young fellows in the State of Chihuahua, being worth several millions, with twice as much more in prospect.

He lives with his father in a splendid modern hacienda on the suburbs of the village of Los Saucillos, where it is said that the prettiest of Senor Martinez's daughters will ere long rule as mistress.

And so, wishing him every happiness, we leave him as a boy who, rich though he is, is still Doing His Level Best.

THE END.

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